

APPARENTLY, **DISILLUSIONED** **ADVENTURERS** WILL **SAVE THE WORLD**

The Ultimate Party Is Born



Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by Susumu Kuroi



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I'LL NEVER TRUST ANYONE AGAIN!

This is all so stupid. I don't want anything to do with adventurers anyway. All these rookies having a fun night out can go to hell, and that goes for the miserable idiots at this table, too. Companions always betray you in the end anyway. Mutual trust is just a damn pipe dream.

Nick chugged his tepid ale, and the feelings he had been bottling up inside tumbled from his mouth in a spontaneous shout.

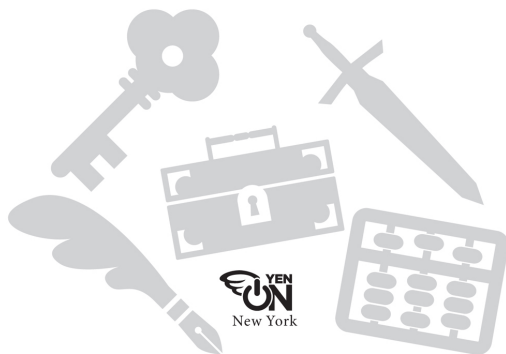
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Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by *Susumu Kuroi*

Translation by *Luke Hutton*

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NINGENFUSHIN NO BOKENSHATACHI GA SEKAI WO SUKUYODESU
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Yen Newsletter

Nick the Light Warrior / Fired Adventurer / Idol Stan



“Nick... You are no longer needed in this party.”

An adventurer's party was like a family. The veterans could be tough on the rookies, but only to make sure they learned the fundamentals; meanwhile, the rookies may have found their seniors' orders tyrannical, but they listened closely. The leader watched over and guided everyone like a father taking care of his children.

That was the ideal for adventurers, the traditional way every party should be.

“...Are you serious?”

This is bullshit, Nick cursed in his mind. So much for ideals.

They were in Teran, a city in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. It was a city that housed untold dangers due to the labyrinths that surrounded it, yet it also managed to be a city of trade with a population in the hundreds of thousands. Teran was teeming with adventurers and merchants hoping to strike it rich—as well as corrupt nobles and priests and other unsavory characters. The city itself had the chaotic air of a labyrinth, where danger and opportunity awaited in equal measure. This state of affairs had earned it the nickname Labyrinth City.

A party of adventurers called Combat Masters was staying at an inn in Labyrinth City. Nick, a light warrior in the party, was asked to stay behind at the table after dinner by the party's leader, a man named Argus. Once the rest of the party left, the man who had raised Nick like a father told him to get lost.

“Yes, I want you to leave the party. Do you want to know why?”

Argus had red hair styled in a crew cut, and long, harsh years of

living as an adventurer had hardened his features. When he spoke, people listened. But Nick wasn't scared of him at all. Argus was the nicest and sweetest man he knew. The request didn't make him afraid—just sad.

"No shit. You can't just kick me out without giving me a reason," Nick responded.

Argus clicked his tongue. "...All right, I'll tell you. You obsess over every detail. That's not how adventurers are supposed to behave. True comrades don't need words to communicate how they feel," he explained.

"Sure."

"Whether you're adventuring with the party or going shopping, you always say what you want without regard for the feelings of others. Even if it means upsetting the person you're talking to."

"Are you telling me I shouldn't complain when I'm getting ripped off?! Merchants fight with words the same way we use swords and magic. If you worry about your opponent's *feelings* in a business negotiation, you'll get squeezed for all you're worth. It's always best to say what needs to be said!" Nick argued passionately, but Argus shook his head.

"The only opponents we fight are monsters in labyrinths. Humans are our allies," he said.

"Argus, you trust merchants way too much. I mean, just the other day—"

"I don't want to hear it. The others are fed up with your grumbling as well."

"You talking about Garos?"

Garos was one of the members of Combat Masters.

"Yes," Argus answered.

"You can't blame me for that! He took money from the party's funds and spent them on a woman, only to find out she was playing him... And this was hardly the first time! We could totally sue him for stealing!" Nick shouted.

"He apologized to me, and he always does his job on our labyrinth expeditions. I have nothing to say on the matter."

"I know he's good in a fight! He's brilliant with a katana! But if you keep letting him get away with this, we'll be broke in no time! Call me crazy, but I don't like our adventures being more dangerous than they need to be!"

"Are you talking about money?"

"What else would I be talking about?"

"Money is for spending, not saving. Surely you have a woman to spend money on as well!"

"I do, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna steal from our party! I

manage on my own!"

"That's what I mean when I say you don't behave like an adventurer! Why can't you forgive a comrade who has apologized?"

"There has to be a line! The reason they never fix their bad habits is because you're always forgiving them and covering for them! I'm angry with Garos, but I'm even angrier with you!"

"That's enough!" Argus slammed a fist on the table. Nick reached out his hand to stop his cup of booze from falling over.

Nick didn't think he was remotely at fault for any of Argus's complaints. That was just how his personality was, and Nick had plenty of grievances of his own.

All the other members of Combat Masters were loose with money. Garos wasn't the only one who used the party's funds however he pleased. Nick had lost count of how many times money had been taken from their wallet to satisfy a gambling binge or how many times they had taken out an advance from a reward to pay a bar tab.

Argus wasn't any better; on days after a successful mission, he always treated everyone to a meal to set an example of how adventurers should behave, without one thought for the cost. He even generously tipped merchants and employees at bars and inns. He said it never hurt to show some gratitude in a business where death could come for you any day.

Nick always told Argus that if he had to do that, he should at least make sure they would still turn a profit. Finding treasure in a labyrinth or defeating a named monster didn't mean they could just party all their money away. If they didn't replenish their medicine and perform maintenance on their weapons, they would be in trouble come their next adventure. They also needed to distribute the reward to all the party members.

It was essential to end up with more money than you started with after taking care of all necessary expenses. But Argus and the rest of the party couldn't care less. They spent the money they obtained with reckless abandon and without even bothering to count it. Nick would always point it out when more spending would result in a net negative income, but Argus did nothing to stop it. Even worse, he always responded by saying, "Adventurers shouldn't be cheapskates." This always resulted in them needing to borrow money from merchants.

"If you can't forgive me or your comrades, you should quit life as an adventurer. You are in no position to speak about other people's behavior," Argus said.

"Huh? What does that mean? Are you trying to suggest I'm no different?" Nick responded.

"I'm not *suggesting* anything. I know what you did. If you admit your offense, I will overlook it and forgive you. If you can't do that, I

want you to get out of my sight,” Argus commanded.

“Overlook...? Hold up, Argus; I have no clue what you’re talking about. What’d I do?” Nick asked, confused.

Argus sighed. “I won’t mince words. You took money from the wallet, too, didn’t you?”

“What?! I told you; that was Garos! That wasn’t me!”

“Yes, I acknowledge that Garos stole from the wallet. But he and the rest of the party all accused you of doing the same.”

Nick was shocked. Not because the other members of his party tried to frame him. He was shocked because Argus believed them—or at least pretended to believe them for the purpose of kicking him out of the party.

Nick had undeniably been butting heads with Argus a lot recently, but he felt no ill will toward him. He had raised Nick, a helpless kid without any special talents, into a full-fledged adventurer. Argus was the best leader Nick could’ve asked for and his teacher in life. No matter their disagreements, Nick held great respect and gratitude for him.

That was why Nick spoke so harshly to him. He figured that these threats to kick him out of the party were just a temporary frustration and Argus would listen to what he had to say. That belief was beginning to crack.

“W-wait, do you actually believe that?! I don’t indulge in gambling, booze, or women! I basically manage our party’s wallet! I can tell you exactly where every coin has gone!”

Nick had learned to be very careful with money because of how recklessly the rest of the party spent it, and he made sure he could always explain his own spending as well as all money that entered and left the party’s funds. That was why he could deny the charge with utmost confidence.

“...You’re missing the point, Nick,” Argus said, shaking his head sadly. “You were just a kid when I brought you into my party. It’s nostalgic to think about it now. You were so small I had to watch to make sure the wind didn’t blow you away; yet look how strong you’ve become.”

“Wha—? Yeah, I’ve grown, but I’m not as good as the others in combat yet—,” Nick began before being interrupted.

“There is more to strength than combat ability. You can confront your leader honestly and voice your disagreements. You can prove your innocence. You can negotiate and make deals with the most cunning of merchants on equal footing. That is all due to your strength.”

“Wh-what’re you getting at here?” Nick was perplexed. He couldn’t tell what Argus’s intention was.

“Nick, I wanted to hear one of two things from you, if not both: ‘Trust me’ or ‘I’m sorry.’”

“...That would be no better than saying nothing at all.” Nick was so astonished he couldn’t find the anger to shout.

“No, you’re wrong. Nearly all adventurers are ne’er-do-wells who have little more than their physical strength to rely on. No matter how brave or cool-headed they may appear, they are no match for people of high intelligence or social standing. You are eloquent, you can do math, and you can write. You should quit being an adventurer and find a regular job. Use your smarts and your talents to serve some noble. Or become a knight. You can find real success for yourself in life.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There are plenty of adventurers who can do that! Are you saying that having a brain means you can’t be an adventurer?!”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that I don’t need you in my party. Frankly, you’re in our way.”

“In your way?!”

Argus didn’t look at Nick. He just closed his eyes, stopped listening, and said what he needed to say.

“Can’t you see it? You and I have conflicting principles. Until now, you were just a kid who couldn’t do anything on his own. That’s why we looked after you. But now you’re a full-fledged adventurer with your own way of doing things, and I don’t intend to change my standards to match yours. You shouldn’t have any reason to remain in this party. Am I wrong?”

Nick was speechless. All the work he had put in over the years had been to repay his debt to Argus. He applied himself every day to help Combat Masters grow into an elite party.

He didn’t have the physique of an adventurer. He was of average height but had difficulty putting on muscle. He had no talent for magic. Nick was confident he was better than a decent amount of adventurers, but he still had a ways to go compared to the skilled warriors in Combat Masters.

Even so, he was dexterous and had a good memory. He made an effort to work on skills that utilized those two things, including weapon and hand-to-hand combat techniques that could be mastered even without tree-trunk-size arms—and methods of defeating larger opponents in a fight. He studied how to disable traps, how to defeat various monsters, how to deal with getting lost in a labyrinth, how to take care of weapons, and how to appraise treasure. He also taught himself how to read and write and do math, how to keep a ledger, and how to negotiate with merchants.

These were all little things, but they were undeniably helpful to

the party. And what thanks did he get for all this effort? The person he respected most telling him to get lost.

“Argus, you’re too good to waste away in a C-rank party! You should always aim for the top if you have the ability! There aren’t even many adventurers in A-rank parties who could beat you!” Nick shouted.

“I think C rank is just right for Combat Masters. If anyone is wasting away...it’s you,” Argus retorted.

“...You’re picking Garos and the others over me.”

“That’s right. They wouldn’t be able to support themselves if they weren’t adventurers. C rank is also the most they can handle. But that doesn’t have to be true for you, Nick. That’s why I don’t care about the facts or which of you is the most law-abiding citizen.”

“Really.”

Nick had always liked Argus—but unfortunately, that was no longer true. “If that’s how it is, I have no use for this party, either,” he said, getting up to walk out of the inn.

“Take care of yourself,” Argus called after him. His back already turned to the man he loved as a father, Nick left the inn without a word.

What happened next was a sad sight.

“So, Claudine. Can I join your party?”

“...Hmm.”

“I’ll do anything for you guys. I swear I’ll be helpful.”

Nick and his girlfriend, Claudine, were at a café called Fromage, which was one of their favorite spots in Labyrinth City. Claudine was an adventurer and the same age as Nick. As fellow light warriors, they often bumped into each other at the same stores. They grew closer over time and eventually started dating. Nick made the first move after falling for her soft, glistening blond hair and her kind eyes.

He did everything and anything Claudine asked. He usually paid for their dates, and he always agreed to lend her money, even when he was struggling financially. Their bond was tighter than an adventurer’s party. At least, that was what he thought.

“Come on, please,” Nick asked again.

“Sorry, but no. I’d lose my position in the party,” Claudine refused.

“H-how much could one extra person really hurt? I can do more than just scout. I’m pretty good at fighting in the vanguard, too...,” Nick pleaded.

“We should break up,” she said with a contrived, doll-like smile.

“...Wha—?”

“Without Combat Masters, you’re just some weak light warrior.”

“Huh?!”

“I thought you must be really impressive because you were one of them. Everyone says they’re A rank in terms of pure strength, if nothing else, but you must’ve been no more than a leech who didn’t deserve to be there. I’ve always put up with you being a little poor, too... Ugh, this is so disappointing!”

“N-no, you’ve got it wrong! I swear that’s not how it—”

Just then, two men approached Nick and Claudine’s table.

“It’s Nick, right? Are her words not gettin’ through that thick skull of yours?”

“No one likes a guy who doesn’t know when to give up.”

One of them was a tigerian warrior, and the other was a human mage. They were both glaring at Nick wickedly.

“...Who the heck are you?” Nick responded without hesitation, glaring back at them. It was Claudine who answered.

“They’re my party members. You know, from Iron Tiger Troop?” she said in a sickly sweet voice. The men rounded on Nick aggressively.

“You’re clearly botherin’ our sweet little scout. Whaddaya want with her, you prick?” the tigerian asked threateningly.

“Bothering her? No, I’m just asking my girlfriend for a little favor,” Nick denied.

“*Girlfriend*? Ugh, don’t call me that. Save me, you two. This guy won’t leave me alone,” Claudine said.

“Huh?!” Nick exclaimed with surprise and anger.

“What the hell, man? You makin’ a move on our princess?” the tigerian accused.

“What? Claudine’s my...!” Nick started, but then he finally noticed. The design on Claudine’s armor matched the tigerian warrior’s before him. That wasn’t all. The sun streaming in through the windows reflected off a talisman hanging around the warrior’s neck. That was no ordinary accessory—it was a valuable piece of defensive equipment that provided resistance against curses and elemental attacks. “...Why the hell do you have that?”

“Oh, this? It was a gift from Claudine.” He laughed mockingly, flaunting the pendant.

Nick had given that to Claudine as a present.

“You bastard!”

“Oooh, you wanna fight? Gimme your best shot. But you do know you’ll get in trouble for startin’ a fight here, right?”

The warrior and the mage both took a combat stance. They were clearly itching to give him a beating.

“Oh, so that’s how it is...”

Nick was already surrounded. This ambush clearly had been the

plan all along. They must have heard somewhere that he had been kicked out of Combat Masters, and they wanted to make sure he gave up on his relationship with Claudine. This meant that Claudine only dated him for his money. Now that he was no longer of use, it was time to dispose of him. It all seemed so obvious now.

“You were super good at finding bargains on accessories from street vendors and peddlers, Nick. This talisman has been very useful. I’m grateful for that, truly... But I’m done with you,” Claudine said.

Nick felt his strength leave his body when he saw her mocking smile. *She’s been deceiving me all along, and now she doesn’t need me anymore*, he thought.

“So be a good boy and get lost. We’ll look the other way if you leave now,” the tigerian warned.

“Toodle-oo,” Claudine said.

They were so flagrantly rude that Nick lost the willpower to fight them. They wouldn’t listen to anything he said, and nothing he did would change anything.

Helplessness, futility, and despair. Those were the emotions that ruled over Nick’s mind.

Nick once had a goal in life—to help boost Argus’s party to A rank.

Combat Masters was currently a C-rank party. In terms of pure fighting strength, every member of the party was one of the strongest warriors in the land. But the party had one critical problem—no one could use magic. The more difficult the labyrinth, the less likely it would be conquerable without magic, which greatly limited their activity. Normally, it would be unthinkable that a party without a single sorcerer would even be able to reach E or D rank.

Combat Masters, however, rose to C rank due to their skill and strength. One small push should have been all that was needed to help them reach a B rank or above, which were considered advanced ranks. That was how Nick planned to repay Argus for adopting and raising him.

Nick was originally the son of a peddler, and his earliest memories were of traveling from town to town with his parents. It wasn’t an easy life, but he was never lonely. His father was a slim, gentle-natured man who could wield a sword when necessary to protect his family. His mother was a hearty, strong-willed woman who was very demanding of her husband, but she was warm and supportive when the time called for it. They both loved their son very much.

Argus was one of their dearest friends. Nick remembered Argus patting him on the head the first time he met him in Labyrinth City. His parents often went out drinking with Argus, but one day the alcohol backfired.

Peddlers needed to transport their goods along highways, which was risky in even the most peaceful of times. They could hire guards if they had the extra funds, but otherwise they would need to protect themselves with their own physical strength. Nick's father was not weak by any means, but he let his guard down one day when meeting Argus in a city. He got drunk after imbibing an unusually large amount of alcohol, and Nick's mother had to support him on the way back to the inn. While they were vulnerable, Nick and his parents were attacked by thieves who sensed they had valuables worth stealing.

If Nick's parents hadn't risked their lives to protect him, he probably would have died. He definitely would have if Argus hadn't come to the rescue after noticing something was wrong. After cutting down the thieves who killed Nick's parents, Argus adopted the boy. He raised him into a full-fledged adventurer. To Nick, Argus was a hero.

Nick wanted Argus to be rewarded for his kindness. He wanted everyone to respect the man the way he did. It was for Argus's sake that he worked to better himself. Nick wanted to prove to Argus he wasn't just someone who needed to be protected and that he could be of help to other people.

He told Claudine everything about his goal and his outlook on life. She must have sensed the guilt and desire he held in his heart and decided she could take advantage of it.

I just wish I wasn't such a burden.

If only I had some good equipment.

Thank you so much, Nick!

Everything she ever said to him was calculated to appeal to his emotions. Nick definitely felt the joy of helping another person when he was with her.

Now he had just experienced a double whammy of being rejected by the person he respected most and discovering he was being used by his girlfriend. Overcome by despair, he stumbled around Labyrinth City like a dead man.

One aimless week later, he looked like a stray dog on the brink of starvation. He had only gone downhill since he was kicked out of Combat Masters.

Little did he know that a life-changing event was about to occur.

It was raining hard that day. Nick was sitting on a park bench without an umbrella, totally motionless.

"Excuse me, sir... You're soaked."

A passing girl spoke to him; apparently, her conscience wouldn't let her leave him there in the rain. She had navy blue hair and was

quite pretty.

“Yep...,” Nick responded.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Leave me alone.”

Nick was in no state of mind to be moved by the girl’s appearance. Seeing a beautiful girl only reminded him of Claudine and made him feel worse. He waved his hand and hissed to shoo her away like she was a dog or a cat.

“...Um,” the girl said hesitantly.

“What do you want?!” Nick shouted with irritation, and the girl shrieked. “...Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Did something bad happen?” she asked.

“Is there anyone who isn’t dealing with something bad?”

“I don’t know? But if there was...”

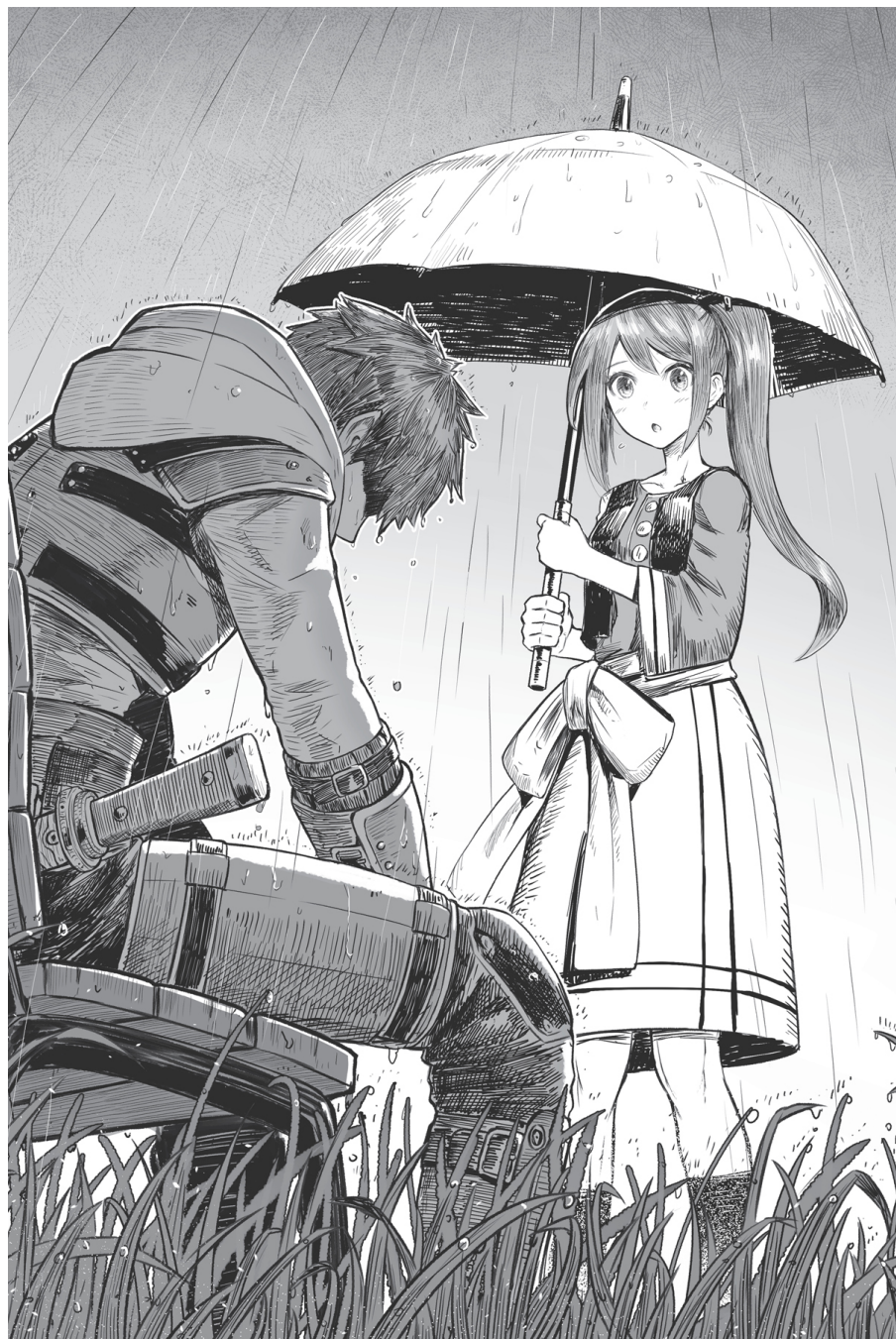
“Yeah?”

“I don’t think I would want to be friends with them.”

“I agree.” Nick smiled sarcastically.

The girl responded with an innocent smile. “So what are you doing here?” she asked.

“...You know, I think there are two types of people who go to parks,” Nick responded. The girl stared back in confusion. “People who choose to go to the park and people who have no choice but to go to the park.”



“Huh.”

“Those who have a choice are good people. Like a mother who brings her baby to the nearby park for a walk, a couple who stops by on a date, or a person taking a shortcut on the way to the station. It’s people who don’t have a choice who are trouble.”

“How so?”

“The latter category consists of thieves, people buying and selling prohibited goods, and even pimps. You know the Adventurers Guild nearby? It’s dangerous here at night because of the losers who can’t even make it as adventurers and have nowhere else to go,” Nick spat, hinting that she should leave immediately. The insinuation was that he was one of those losers.

“U-um...” The girl hesitated.

“What?” Nick asked.

“Please don’t get mad at me for asking this...,” she began timidly. She probably thought Nick was a failed adventurer trying to make a living with some shady business. He really didn’t care what she thought; he just wished she would leave him alone.

“What is it? If you’re planning on lecturing me—”

“Why are pimps called pimps?”

Nick was astonished by her absurd question.

“How should I know? It doesn’t matter what they’re called. Just know you should stay away from them.”

“Actually, I’m not really sure what *pimp* means.”

“You should’ve said that first!” Nick yelled, resisting the urge to put his face in his hands.

Totally unbothered by his reaction, the girl asked the question again. “Sorry. So what does it mean?”

Nick had no idea what to say. He could have told her straight that they were people who hooked others up with prostitutes for a share of the earnings...but he was too embarrassed to say that, so he dodged the question.

“A-all you need to know is that they’re bad people.”

“Huh... Gotcha.”

“Good.”

“So are you a bad person, too?”

Nick fell silent once again. He should’ve been able to deny it. But he had no idea what tomorrow or the next day would bring. He still had the skills he had cultivated. He had been totally played by his ex-girlfriend, but it probably wouldn’t be too hard for him to become a swindler and deceive naive adventurers like himself.

He knew how to assess the quality and value of labyrinth treasures. He was literate and could do math. He could keep an

account book. He could negotiate with merchants. Putting all that together, it would be a cinch for Nick to fool ignorant adventurers from the countryside who couldn't even do simple math.

"Yeah, I am... So you should stay away from me. Go home before you catch a cold," he answered with an awkward expression, standing up.

"Hey, wait!" the girl said.

"What is it now?" Nick snapped.

"Take this," she said, handing him a slip of paper.

"...Is this a concert ticket?"

Nick read the words on the slip of paper. It said JEWELRY PRODUCTION'S LABYRINTH CITY THANKSGIVING CONCERT TICKET.

"That was originally for my family, but I had too many," the girl explained.

"Sorry, I don't know what this is," Nick said.

"I-I'm...an idol."

"An idol? What's that?" he asked, perplexed.

"Huh? You don't know what an idol is?!"

"Not a clue."

The girl seemed irritated by his ignorance. "You act like you know everything, but you don't even know what an idol is?!" she exclaimed.

"What does it matter? I've never heard the damn word. I don't need this," Nick said. He tried to return the ticket, but the girl backed away.

"No, I want you to take it."

Nick sighed in response. "Do you not understand what I'm tellin' you? You should stay away from dangerous people like me!"

"Dangerous people don't call themselves dangerous! That means you're probably good! Just take the ticket!"

Realizing this was a losing battle, Nick did as he was told and withdrew his hand. But holding on to the ticket didn't make him feel anything in particular. It could have been any scrap of paper.

Nick's attitude only further annoyed the girl. Anger entered her voice.

"Listen up!" she said.

"Wh-what is it?" Nick replied.

"I am an idol!"

"You said that already."

"Believe it or not, I'm pretty popular!"

"Are you, now?"

"Idols make people happy and give them courage! You're looking at me like a sad stray dog on the verge of death, and I don't like it!"

"...Sorry, I'm not following this."

"You don't have to understand. But..."

“But?”

“Please come to the concert. It’s tomorrow at the town hall by the south gate!”

“Wh-why?”

“Just come, okay? See you later!”

Taken aback by the girl’s pushy attitude, he could do nothing but watch her back as she stormed off.

The next day, Nick went to the town hall as he was told. He could’ve just thrown away the ticket, but for some reason, he couldn’t make himself do it. He felt like that was the first conversation he’d had in a while with a person who had no ulterior motive or ill will toward him. If he threw away the ticket and broke his promise, he’d be throwing away that good-natured sentiment as well.

He was bewildered by what he saw when he arrived.

“What’s with this crowd?”

The town hall was a place where merchants could set up shop with permission from the city, and it was usually peaceful and clean. Now, however, it was packed with a jostling crowd of filthy men. Not even festivals or flea markets got this congested.

“What the hell is going on here...? I should leave,” Nick said, sighing with exhaustion. He didn’t have the energy to stick around this kind of crowd. Just when he was about to leave, a wide-eyed man asked him a question.

“What’s your deal? Do you not know what this event is?”

“G-got a problem with that?”

“Of course I do. Now, listen up, this is a—”

He was interrupted when the lights in the town hall abruptly went out.

“Wh-what the heck?” Nick shouted, confused.

“Shh, it’s starting!” the man whispered. All the other spectators stopped talking as well. There wasn’t even the faintest buzz in the now dead silent town hall.

“Hello, everyone! Thank you for coming today!”

A girl’s voice echoed suddenly and loudly, and lights bright enough to radiate heat illuminated the town hall’s stage. The lights revealed the figures of five girls.

“YEEEEAAAAHHH!”

The men in the audience roared at the sight of them; they might as well have been charging into battle. The girls were wearing dazzling outfits and waving their hands.

“Today is Jewelry Production’s Labyrinth City Thanksgiving Concert!”

“We’re going to sing our hearts out for our fans in Labyrinth

City!”

“We have a new song for you, too! You guys are the lucky fans who get to see its debut!”

“Let’s all let loose and have a great time!”

The five girls took turns speaking to the crowd.

Then Nick noticed. “That girl...”

One of them was the girl with navy blue hair who gave him the ticket.

“Agate! I love you!”

The blue-haired girl—whose name was apparently Agate—waved in response to the cheers from the men. He heard a number of men call her Aggie as well.

“All right, all five of us are going to sing the first song! You all know it, right? It’s called...”

The idol deliberately trailed off for the audience to finish her sentence. There was no way the spectators could have practiced for this, but they all answered simultaneously.

““The Goddess’s Fight Song”!”

“That’s right! Let’s get started!”

An explosive cheer from the audience shook the venue, and the magically amplified singing and instruments assaulted Nick’s ears.

“Th-this is amazing...!”

Nick was sucked in by the booming sound, the crowd’s feverish excitement, and the passion of the idols. It was overpowering. His eyes sparkled like a child’s as he watched the girls dance.

“Aa-aah, flash the banner for the goddess, and she’ll clear away the darkness!”

“YEAAAHHH!”

So this was an idol concert. Agate and the other girls were dancing their hearts out. The first song was bright and positive with a cheerful melody—perfectly suited for the opener. The five girls each got their own part to sing and dance, and their excellent teamwork was clear to see.

The next five songs gave each girl an opportunity to take center stage and sing individually. They each had their own image and color, and the stage lights and the magic glow sticks the audience members held changed color with each song.

The theme and melody of those five songs differed as well. One song had lyrics about a joyful farming community set to a nostalgic tune, and another song was about a passionate, transitory love.

Unexpectedly, Agate’s song was about a broken heart—about saying good-bye to a partner who no longer loved you and embarking on a trip to recover from the sadness. It was rich with the pain and loneliness of adulthood. Agate looked nothing like the naive girl who

spoke to Nick the previous day; instead, she looked like an elegant, mature woman who had been through real heartbreak. Nick could feel himself being won over.

Hope was the theme of the closing number. The opener had been about cheering someone on who was embarking on a journey, and this one was about reaching out a hand to a person who had failed at their dream and been crushed by the harshness of reality. The lyrics were brimming with kindness. The final song was a chorus from all the girls just like the first one, and Nick found the performance bewitching and divine. He was especially taken by Agate's beauty as she gave her all to the performance.

Her words from the previous day repeated in Nick's head. *Idols make people happy and give them courage!* What he had written off as a naive idealism was the unmistakable truth. The idols were touching the hearts of every man in this venue. The one who spoke to Nick before the show was waving his magic glow stick and clapping his hands to the rhythm, clearly having the time of his life. Everyone was receiving the hope to keep on living.

Nick set himself free and joined in their unadulterated joy and passion.

Before he knew it, Nick had become a huge idol fan.

"Whoo-hoo! ♪ Are you all excited?!"

"I LOVE YOU, AGGIE! YOU'RE THE BEST!"

He went to every concert and bought all of Agate's navy-blue merchandise, including a jacket and a magic glow stick. He spent his savings without a care and forgot himself as he cheered on the singing idols.

The old Nick never would have let himself develop a fixation like this. But he had just experienced real hardship in his life that flipped his world upside down, which gave him a chance to face his true self and find enlightenment. Or at least, a reckless obsession that he mistook for enlightenment.

The truth Nick realized from his enlightenment was that he had been a fool to devote his love to a relationship so worldly as a "girlfriend." No, there was a higher being more deserving. He poured his money into Agate and cheered as hard as he could at her concerts to demonstrate his affections.

Nick had found it. A being worth devoting his life to.

But that slovenly lifestyle couldn't continue forever. By the time he finally regained his composure, he had spent almost all of his life savings. He had never had enough money to indulge himself to this extent in the first place. By his calculations, he only had enough money left to eat and sleep at the very worst of inns for a few days.

“...I need to start working again.”

Nick finally got down to moving on with his life. Immersing himself in idol concerts had given him the willpower to keep living.

He hadn't been back to that park since the day Agate approached him. Before he met her, he had lost all hope for his future, assuming it wouldn't be long before he became another failed adventurer who joined some underground gang. Now, however, those negative feelings had vanished. He would live honestly no matter what painful experiences he went through. Then he would take his hard-earned money and use it to attend idol concerts. That was the lifestyle Nick was going to pride himself on as an idol devotee.

The first place Nick went to after deciding to regain a decent life for himself was the Newbies Adventurers Guild, a branch of the Adventurers Guild where many beginner adventurers gathered. This city forbade people from venturing into labyrinths on their own. Not even pairs received permission to enter a labyrinth unless both were advanced adventurers or possessed equivalent strength. Parties of three could enter a labyrinth but only if all members were experienced, and parties with at least one newcomer were required to have four people or more.

Newbies recruited new adventurers who couldn't find a party, and it also served as a place for new adventurers to be discovered and recruited elsewhere. Nick decided he was going to approach someone in that guild. Combat Masters was renowned for its strength, and he was certain there would be parties willing to bring in an ex-member.

But when he entered the guild, he was unable to get himself to approach anyone. He was scared. The words of his father figure when he said he didn't need him anymore still pierced his heart like thorns. The idol concerts had helped him gain a new determination to live a decent life, but that didn't mean the wounds of betrayal from his fellow adventurers had completely healed.

Nick was never shy about cheering on the idols at their concerts. There was a line that couldn't be crossed between the stage and the audience, and the hardworking girls on the stage were practically targets of worship for him. He was able to show them his love without a care. Relationships with one's party members were considerably more complex. They weren't just coworkers—they were people you trusted your back to in dangerous labyrinths. Trusting other adventurers felt extremely difficult for him at the moment.

In the end, Nick just wandered aimlessly around without being able to approach anyone and had to leave when the guild closed.

“Haah...,” he sighed before entering a neighboring bar. This bar catered to new adventurers and sold only the worst food and alcohol. Groups of adventurers who had just formed parties were enjoying

themselves at the nearby tables.

Nick tried to sit at the counter, but all the seats were taken.

"You alone? Sit at that empty table," an employee directed.

The employee, seemingly annoyed, led Nick to the table. He sat down and ordered barley porridge and ale diluted with water. The porridge here contained barely any salt; no one would accuse it of tasting good.

Despite the quality of the food, the rookie adventurers at a nearby table scarfed it down as if it were the greatest feast they'd ever had.

"Cheers to our new party!"

"I can't wait to work with you guys! Leave the vanguard to me!"

"Counting on you! I'm still an apprentice as a priestess, but I was deemed worthy to go on a training pilgrimage. I'm good at healing magic!"

The sight of the merry, carefree adventurers was more than Nick could handle right now. He tried his best to think of nothing as he waited for his food and drink to arrive. An employee walked up to him.

The food's finally here, Nick thought with relief, but then he saw that the employee was empty-handed.

"Sorry, but you're gonna have to share the table. The counter's full."

They were apparently using Nick's table as a place to shove all the solo customers who had nowhere else to sit. Customers were led to his table in quick succession until the four-seat table was filled.

You've gotta have problems to come to a restaurant like this alone... Though, I guess that applies to me, too. Nick studied the newly arrived customers surreptitiously. They all looked like strange people.

The first person was an elegant blond mage. She was wearing a stylish purple robe and hat, and she had a staff with a clear-blue jewel. Her equipment didn't just look nice, it was also evidently of high quality. Only a person of true skill could manage to dress like her. Her hands poking out of the ends of her sleeves were small and delicate, but Nick was sure she was a talented mage.

She may have been beautiful and capable, but there was one thing that spoiled any charm she could have had—the dangerous gleam in her eyes. She would have been a woman of unrivaled beauty if she had just smiled. Instead, she looked menacing enough to stab someone to death with a knife. Sensing danger, the surrounding customers made no attempt to talk to her.

The second person was a tall, handsome man who looked like a priest. There was something off about him, too. He had a holy book used for chanting healing magic, and he was wearing a long-sleeved black cassock—all the typical items and clothing for a priest.

But what he didn't have was a pendant around his neck. Priests usually wore a metal pendant representing something that their sect valued—a book to symbolize wisdom, for example, or an ear of rice to symbolize food—that served as important identification to show their affiliation at a glance. That he didn't have one likely meant that he had been excommunicated. Nick guessed that his pendant had been confiscated when he was discharged as a priest.

Supporting that theory, the man smelled of cosmetics and alcohol, and there was despair visible in his eyes. He was probably on his way back from a brothel or a hostess club. As far as Nick knew, there were no sanctuaries that allowed its members to visit brothels.

Despite the popularity of priests, the surrounding customers made no attempt to talk to him. They must have sensed his strangeness as well.

The third person at the table was a red-haired dragonian woman. She had two horns and a long tail, and her arms were covered in scales. These were all characteristics of the dragonian race. A glimpse of worn armor was visible under her beat-up leather jacket. She was probably a warrior who fought enemies in close combat; her beauty was both wild and feminine.

Her chest was large, and she had supple arms and legs. Any man would only need a glance to be enticed. A strong and beautiful dragonian like her should have been popular among a group of adventurers, but no one tried to talk to her as well.

She didn't have the wrathful anger of the mage or the despondency of the priest. Instead, she had the aura of a wounded beast living in an eat-or-be-eaten world. Just looking at her made him feel he was in a labyrinth full of monsters or a battlefield full of enemy soldiers. The surrounding customers didn't just avoid talking to her; they acted as if there was no one there at all. Everyone was too afraid of attracting the attention of her golden eyes.

The corners of Nick's mouth curled upward in self-derision. He figured he was just as unapproachable as they were.

After a long wait, an employee finally brought the food and drinks to the silent table. "Please enjoy," they said in a contrived voice, and no one responded.

This is all so stupid. I don't want anything to do with adventurers anyway. All these rookies having a fun night out can go to hell, and that goes for the miserable idiots at this table, too. Companions always betray you in the end anyway. Mutual trust is just a damn pipe dream. Argus was right—I'm not cut out for being an adventurer, Nick thought mockingly.

He chugged his tepid ale, and the feelings he had been bottling up inside tumbled from his mouth in a spontaneous shout.

""""""I'll never trust anyone again!""""""

...Huh? Did we all just say the same thing?

Tiana the Mage / Former Noble / Gambler



Students studied a variety of subjects at aristocratic schools in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez, including etiquette, horsemanship, swordsmanship, law, philosophy, math, history, poetry, and art. But there was one subject that was emphasized above all the rest at aristocratic schools in the royal capital.

“Lightning Strike!”

That subject was magic.

A clear and imposing voice echoed through the magic practice field of the school. Shortly afterward, low, dark clouds formed and produced a bolt of lightning. The blinding flash was followed by a thundering roar.

The observing teachers all gasped with admiration.

“Simply incredible. You truly live up to your name as a daughter of House Ernafelt.”

“Lightning magic can only be performed through mastery of the water and wind elements, and yet you exhibit such complete control.”

Magic was a comprehensive field that connects math, philosophy, history, and all other branches of study. It was essential to the construction of human culture and society, which meant that tracing the development of magic revealed the history of humankind. Performing basic spells only required mana and rote recitation of the incantations, but if someone wanted to become an advanced mage, there was nothing more important than observing nature. You needed knowledge such as how fires begin and what causes them to burn more intensely, as well as how water flows and what makes it turn into ice or vapor. Magic was not a simple weapon for mercenaries or

adventurers just trying to live another day; it existed to be studied and used by mages with an inquisitive mind.

This was what mages of noble birth believed. Tiana—the girl who just performed the Lightning Strike spell—took similar pride in her magic.

“I do not study magic for my own personal gain. I only want to satisfy my own intellectual curiosity,” Tiana said, her beautiful blond hair fluttering behind her in the wind. She was about a head shorter than the average height for her age and was still somewhat baby-faced, but she still had a presence about her as she puffed out her chest in answer to the compliments from her teachers.

“You never cease to impress. You can use a wind and water compound spell as easily as another might move their own arms and legs, yet you remain humble. You truly are the pride of our school,” one of the teachers praised.

“Thank you very much,” Tiana responded, feeling a little guilty. She was partially lying when she said she studied magic only for her own intellectual curiosity. She had one more important reason.

“You have done more than enough to satisfy the requirements for graduation. Let’s end today’s test here. Good work, Tiana.”

“Thank you!” Tiana bowed her head to her teacher, keeping her face firm so her cheerful mood wouldn’t show, and left the practice field. She already had a destination in mind—a café for nobles that was in a shopping district within reasonable walking distance of the school.

The sweet smell of coffee reached her nose as she walked along the lively and decorated stone-paved road. The source of the smell was her sweetheart’s favorite café. The bell that rang when she opened the door sounded as if it shared her joy.

“Welcome,” an employee greeted her.

“Is Alex here?” Tiana asked.

“Uh, well...,” the employee mumbled, but Tiana paid no heed.

“I’m sure he’s here.”

She walked through the restaurant, figuring he was at his usual spot. There was a seat on the second floor that Alex really liked and was practically reserved for him.

“Alex!” Tiana called out to a young man chatting by the window after she went up the stairs. She ignored the girl sitting next to him.

“Hey, Tiana... Aren’t you in a good mood,” he responded.

“Hmm? What’s going on, Alex? What do you look so happy about?”

Alex was Tiana’s fiancé. He was the heir to a baron’s house, and he went to the same school as her. His thin chestnut hair and clear skin could both be mistaken for a girl’s. She wasn’t one to brag, but

she was proud to have such a handsome fiancé.

Tiana valued his skill as a poet even more than his good looks. His magic skill was average, but she didn't think that was a big deal next to the beauty of his verse. In her eyes, he was the nicest person in the world when he recited his emotionally rich and kind poems, and she loved him very much.

Lately, however, Alex had been frequently skipping school to hang out at cafés and bars. Tiana trusted him when he said "It's important to take time to form connections" and chose not to admonish him. It was true that he had gathered many people around him...and she was aware that many of those people were girls their age. However, only Tiana could call herself his fiancée, and only she knew his true, inner beauty. That made her feel superior, unthreatened by their presence.

"I should be asking *you* that question. I'm surprised," Alex answered.

"Huh? What do you mean? Anyway, wait till you hear this," Tiana said.

"Don't tell me, you *astounded* the teachers with another *stunning* spell?" he asked.

Tiana beamed, having totally missed the sarcasm in his voice. "Yeah, I did! I learned how to use lightning magic, and the teachers were really impressed! They even said I can graduate a year early!"

"Wow...", Alex responded, deadpan.

"So, Alex..." Blushing, Tiana took a seat next to him. She was interrupted when a girl with long black hair who had been chatting with Alex before she arrived spoke to her with a superficial smile.

"It's rude to brag about oneself right after meeting someone. Did your parents not teach you any manners?"

Tiana finally looked at the girl. "I'm talking to Alex."

"And Lord Alex is talking to me. It is hardly appropriate behavior for a lady to bother a man like that," the girl said.

"Alex, can you tell her to go away?" Tiana requested, ignoring her.

Alex rubbed his fingers into his brow and sighed. "Will you stop that? You're bothering the other customers and the employees."

"B-but..."

"I said stop!" Alex screamed, pounding the table. That was the first time Tiana had ever seen him raise his voice like that.

"A-Alex, calm down... What's wrong?" Tiana asked soothingly, frightened by his mood.

Alex took a deep breath to regain his composure. His anger remained, however. "You're always like that, never sparing a moment to look at me. How can you possibly be so obtuse?!"

"Wh-what are you talking about?" Tiana asked.

“The way you brag about your magic! I’m sick of it!” Alex yelled.

Tiana almost fell over. She had seen plenty of other guys grow jealous of her magic skills. Many had even told her it was unbecoming of a girl. That was never easy to hear, but she was able to put up with it when she thought about how all her efforts were for her beloved fiancé.

“H-huh...? You were the one who asked me to help you because you wanted to be a mage when you grew up... You’re the reason that I...”

That I work so hard. She had never said those words aloud.

Tiana and Alex had a promise between the two of them—that they would devote themselves to the study of magic in preparation for their lives after marriage. Alex’s father currently used his shrewdness as the head of their baron-rank house, but he once rendered exceptional service as a mage in the Magic Division of the kingdom’s army. Alex’s family expected him to follow in his father’s footsteps, and they wanted his wife to be a skilled mage as well.

Truthfully, it was because of Tiana’s potential as a mage that Alex’s father wanted her to marry his son. When her marriage interview with Alex went well, and they began dating, his father told her that “You don’t have to hold back in your magic studies because you’re a girl” and “Your studies will benefit the family, so you have my support.”

The shrill voice of the young man before her drove those memories from Tiana’s head.

“I’m the reason that you work so hard? Is that what you were going to say? Use your brain! Do you have any idea how much I’m ridiculed for living in the shadow of the most talented mage in the school?! Would it kill you to hold back? If you had any sense, you’d understand that you should’ve only worked hard enough to be useful to me, or at least to not damage my reputation!”

“B-but...your father said I didn’t have to hold back...,” Tiana protested.

“Why would you believe something like that?! He was just being polite!”

“H-hold on... What’s wrong, Allen...?”

Tiana heard chuckling. She glared at the source.

“Oh dear, you’re scaring me, Lady Tiana,” the black-haired girl said.

“Shouldn’t you introduce yourself before speaking to me?” Tiana said.

“Hmph, you really don’t care about anyone but yourself... You’re so arrogant. But fine. I am Lene, the eldest daughter of House Delcott.”

“Oh, I remember you. You’re that nouveau riche who just started going to our school.”

House Delcott was originally a merchant’s family that made a fortune with a land and maritime transportation service utilizing dragons. They were commoners just three generations back and received their baron’s rank when they were recognized for bringing profit to the country with the construction of their speedy transportation network. Lately they had started dabbling in finance, gaining significant power by lending money to nobles in financial straits. Not even the highest-ranking nobles could take them lightly. That influence even extended to their school; Lene had dirt on many noble girls.

Tiana had never spoken to Lene before, but there was no way she wouldn’t have known her face and name. She ignored her initially as a way to express her displeasure at her presence. Tiana was Alex’s fiancée, after all. There was no way Alex would get serious about some other girl. She was convinced of that.

“Tiana! Don’t say things like that! Do you have any idea the kind of unfounded rumors she always has to put up with?”

“Unfounded?”

Tiana knew for a fact that Lene wielded her family’s influence to treat many students at school like her servants. It was an open secret, and some of Tiana’s classmates had come to her for advice about their difficulties with her.

“Yeah, she confided in me. She said she’s being harassed. And not only that...” Alex sighed with disgust, and Lene laid a hand atop his. “Tiana, she said you’re the culprit behind this harassment.”

“What?!” Tiana yelled with surprise. Alex and Lene smirked when they saw her face.

“I know all about how you used your influence to try to ensnare Lene, Tiana,” Alex continued.

“That’s right. Lord Allen is the one who reached out a hand and saved me,” Lene added.

Tiana clenched her teeth in anger.

“That is not all you are guilty of, Lady Tiana. You seduced the teachers, didn’t you?” Lene accused.

“E-excuse me?!” Tiana glared at Lene with eyes that could kill. “Do you understand what you’re saying? You’re insulting not just me, but the entire school.”

“Haah... You are the one who doesn’t understand. It’s common sense to suspect something is up with teachers who would make a girl head of the class,” Lene fired back.

“...Do you want to settle this in court?” Tiana threatened. Reputation was very important in noble society. This kind of insult,

especially a falsehood concerning one's chastity, was a full-fledged crime. Her threat wasn't an empty one; it was perfectly possible for Tiana to take her to court.

Lene just smiled sweetly in response. "I invite you to try. Although, I assume the teachers will raise the white flag before you get a chance."

"...What do you mean?" Tiana asked.

That had to be a bluff. Tiana tried to convince herself of that. But this wily girl had trapped many people. She had a bad feeling, which was justified by what Alex said next.

"Tiana. The teachers at our school are under suspicion for accepting bribes and manipulating the results of entrance exams and students' grades. You have also been accused of giving bribes to your teachers and seducing them."

"Th-that's ridiculous! I..." Tiana trailed off upon realizing something. Alex wasn't always diligent in his studies, but he was not dumb enough to be cajoled by a girl and believe whatever he was told. He was raised in noble society, where such attempts at deception were an everyday occurrence. This alliance between Alex and Lene was more than just a simple affair—they both stood to profit from this. Trapping Tiana was how they were going to achieve that. The part of Tiana's brain that could still think rationally analyzed the situation.

"That's why I'm canceling our engagement... Don't show yourself around me ever again!" Alex yelled.

Tiana didn't think she would be able to forget Alex's and Lene's hideous smiles—or their words that represented the ugliest aspects of noble society—for the rest of her life.

Disaster followed. Lene's and Alex's words weren't empty threats. The headmaster and the teachers most involved with Tiana's instruction were removed from their posts and demoted to meaningless, do-nothing jobs. It wasn't treated as an official incident, but the Ministry of Education sent an order demanding that the teachers be replaced.

Tiana believed that the headmaster and her teachers never would have sunk so low as to accept bribes. Regardless of the truth, however, the game had already been lost. It was a part of noble society that when the country gave out punishment, the accusations were treated as real no matter how dubious they were.

Misfortune befell Tiana as well.

"Leave this house and never come back."

Her father's words allowed for no argument. She may as well have been talking to a boulder.

Despite that, Tiana still argued. "I'm innocent."

“I’m sure you are. You just happened to be used in this scheme. I imagine as well that this Lene girl was acting on her parents’ orders. They intend to tighten their hold on the school using people under House Delcott’s patronage and increase their influence in the Magic Division with the help of their daughter’s relationship with Alex. You were nothing more than a convenient sacrificial lamb,” her father said.

“You’re forcing me to live as a commoner even though you know all that?” Tiana asked, clenching her fists tightly. Her father’s reply had a trace of sarcasm.

“What do you suggest we do about it? Protest in court that you were framed? I’d support you if you had a chance of winning.”

Tiana didn’t think he was lying. People would listen to her if she had actual political influence. The problem was that she was just a girl gifted at magic who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She had no political worth.

“Grr...!”

“There are no longer any houses that will accept you as a wife. That will only earn the wrath of House Delcott. There may be a few lecherous nobles who will take you as one of their many concubines, but...”

“No,” Tiana refused immediately. Being the wife of a noble might sound nice, but being coupled with no support or expectations from her family was little better than being a mistress. She would likely end up being treated as a toy.

“As I thought. That was why I didn’t ask. That means you are no longer a member of this family,” he declared.

“...Fine. Good-bye, Father.”

Tiana felt regret the moment she said those words. She wasn’t sure she could make it on her own. That said, there was no way she would have accepted becoming a concubine. She could see her fate if she chose that path. If Alex or Lene saw her in that wretched state, she would probably kill them and then die herself. She would rather expire on the side of the road in some unknown land than face that humiliation.

So she left her home. Her family didn’t even offer her a prayer for safe travels. They did give her a decent amount of money to cover expenses and permission to take some accessories and tools for work as a mage, but that was nothing more than a means of avoiding blame for abandoning their daughter.

That was how nobles were. Some of her half-siblings had probably been jealous of her. Some may have even been celebrating her departure.

But if she had to wander out into the unknown, Tiana thought it

was good that her family was so cold to her. Better for her to never want to return home again than to feel miserable and homesick. This way, she could feel hope for her future. That was why she decided to travel to a city as far from the royal capital as possible.

This was her first time traveling alone, but Tiana wasn't the type of noble lady who was pampered by her parents. They were laissez-faire with her, and she learned much from her private tutors and servants as a result of her curiosity. She would even leave the house as a child and venture to the ever-crowded shopping district.

Tiana was gloomy at the start of the trip, worrying that she would end up hanging by her neck from a tree somewhere, but her mood changed gradually over time. She mostly remained inside the stagecoach, but as she traveled unfamiliar roads, stayed in unfamiliar towns, and spoke to unfamiliar people, she found the journey exciting and curative.

She spoke to families who lost their home in a natural disaster and were searching for new land, traveling merchants dreaming of getting rich quick, priests hoping to be promoted in their church through a journey of service and salvation, touring idols, and more. She encountered both good and bad people. Before long, she became optimistic that she really could make it on her own—and that everything would work out in the end. It turned out that she enjoyed traveling.

Her final destination was Teran, also known as Labyrinth City.

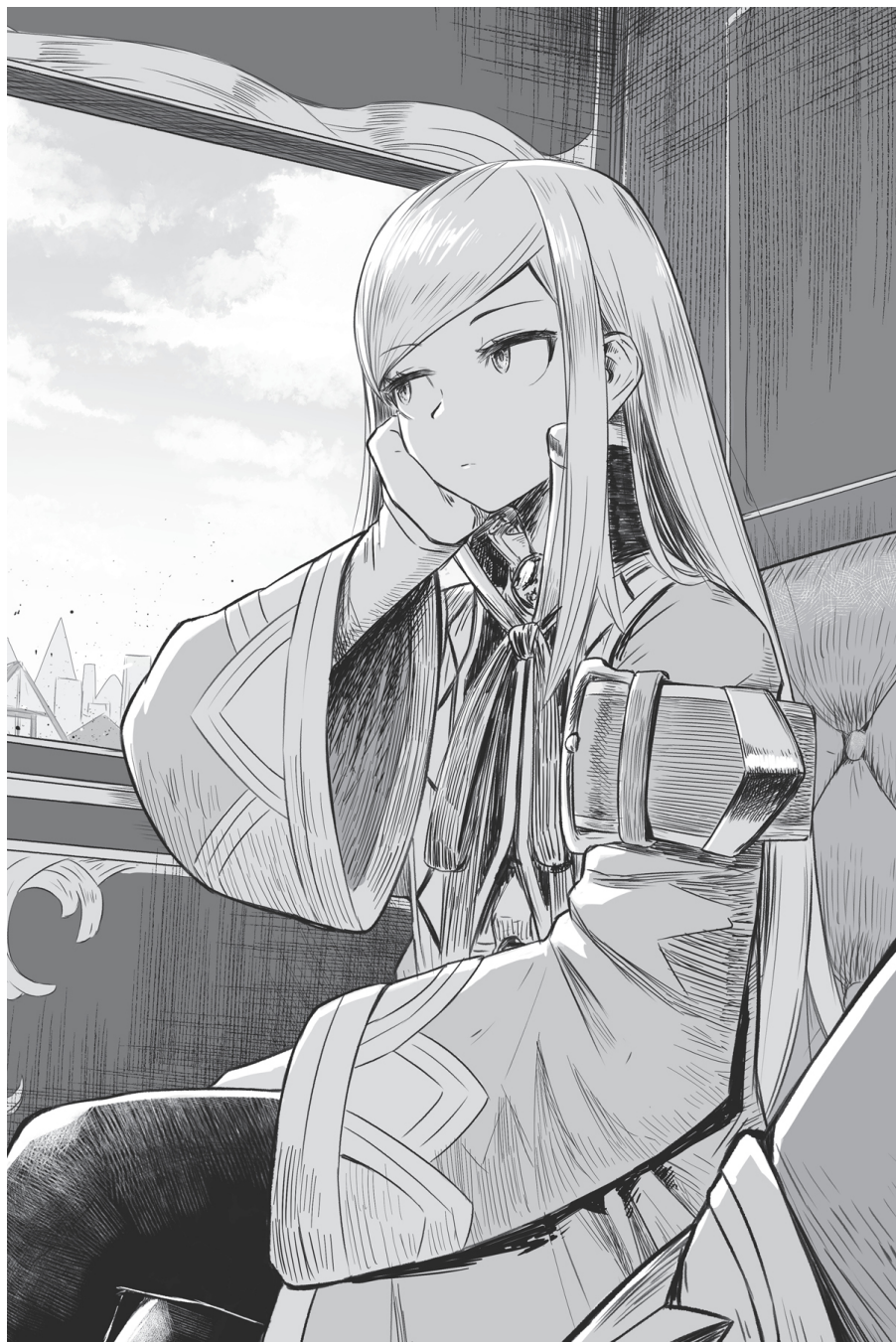
“I finally made it...”

After over a month in the rickety carriage, Tiana massaged her aching back, rented an apartment, and finally got a moment to rest. *It all starts here*, she thought, renewing her determination.

“I need to find a job.”

According to what she had heard on her travels, nearly all ruined nobles and mages who failed to get a job eventually found themselves in Labyrinth City. It was the most vibrant city in the kingdom and offered lots of job opportunities.

Poor people struggling to afford food could work as adventurers. Educated people with a school degree were sought by merchant guilds, magic item factories, and elsewhere. A genius student from an aristocratic school who could do magic and math, and was even knowledgeable about law, like Tiana, would have no trouble finding a job. That was the expectation anyway.



“Sorry, we already have enough staff.”

“This magic research institute only hires candidates with a letter of introduction. Please leave.”

“This isn’t a place for girls from noble families like you.”

Her search for a job ended in crushing defeat. The truth was that there was currently a surplus of mages looking for jobs. A coup d’état had just occurred in the bordering Magic Empire, and many of their first-rate mages ended up in Labyrinth City after fleeing abroad. Highly skilled personnel who normally couldn’t be hired in Dineez without dozens of gold coins could currently be hired for cheap.

To mages job hunting in Labyrinth City, it was a nightmarish buyer’s market with more applicants than there were jobs. That was true of office work that required math and writing abilities as well. The two countries shared an official language, and because any linguistic differences amounted to nothing more than small variations of dialect, there was no communication issue for the immigrants.

Fortune was not on Tiana’s side.

“Haah... Why is my luck so bad?”

She still had a decent amount of money that her family gave her. It would last her for a while. But being constantly rejected while trying to get a job using the magic skills she had worked so hard on was starting to wear on her. She bought only the cheapest bread and ate in public parks as she continued her job search. No matter how much she lowered her expectations for the type of job and working conditions, she couldn’t find anyone who would hire her. All she could do was sigh.

Just when it seemed her heart was about to give into despair once again, a young man approached her.

“Hey, beautiful. Are you free?” he asked.

“If you’re hitting on me, I’m not interested,” Tiana said, pointing her staff at him.

“Whoa, are you crazy?! I-it’s a crime to attack someone with magic!”

“Maybe I am. I recommend you don’t talk to me unless you want to get hurt.”

Tiana was aware of that rule, of course. Her threat was an empty one. She was simply irritated because the man’s handsome appearance reminded her of her ex-fiancé.

“I’m not hitting on you; I swear. I only wanted to give you this,” the man said, forcing a piece of paper into her hands. It had a drawing of a dragon and the words DRAGON RACING written on it. There was also a list of dragon names and a detailed schedule, but Tiana didn’t understand what it was for.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“The famed Labyrinth City dragon racing. It’s a race where the fastest dragon wins, as the name implies. It’s very fun to bet on the races,” the man explained.

Tiana stared closely at the flier the man gave her. Casinos and gambling dens were illegal in the royal capital, so she had never been to a racetrack. She had seen people open their own joints to bet on matches between knights, but she never gave it a second thought beyond how senseless it appeared.

“Oh yeah. I’ll give you a ticket for a free meal at the cafeteria there, so stop by whenever you have time.”

Tiana wasn’t the least bit interested, and she just stared at him in silence with an apathetic expression. The man quickly walked away; her cold attitude must have caused him to give up.

Despite her initial reaction, Tiana decided on a whim to go check out the dragon racing. She recalled hearing that racetracks often hired mages. There were a number of jobs including cracking down on people who tried to use magic items to interfere with the race, or forming barriers to prevent probing spells. Given that this was city-sanctioned gambling, they would probably do a background check when it came time to hire her. Her family may have banished her, but she was still a noble. She should be more trustworthy than mages who fled here from abroad.

“I should go check it out.”

True disaster followed.

The racing track’s clientele consisted of more than just gambling-crazed men, enabling it to present a fun and safe atmosphere. It was normally only open during daytime hours, which kept out the kind of shady customers that would show up at night. The track was loud, but it didn’t feel dangerous.

That caused Tiana to relax and, on a whim, buy a betting ticket for one of the dragon races. After that, she thought she might as well stick around to watch the race. The entire crowd was engrossed in the race and yelling at the top of their lungs.

This place is nothing like the royal capital... It’s a little loud for me, Tiana thought with a sigh, overwhelmed by the sight before her. But before she knew it, she was just as absorbed as everyone else.

“First place goes to Infinite Blue. Second place was Meteor Arrow. Please collect your earnings at the window,” sounded a crackly, magically enhanced announcement.

The entire crowd started booing. The dragon that was favored to win the race had slipped and fallen due to muddy conditions created by a sudden downpour. The other dragons struggled to adapt as well,

throwing the race into chaos and causing nearly everyone to lose their bets.

“I...won...?”

But Tiana, who bought her ticket on a total whim, actually picked the winning dragon. Her ticket gave her a return of ten gold coins for the one silver coin she bet... In other words, her one thousand dina became one hundred thousand dina.

“Congratulations!”

“Oh, th-thank you.”

Don't say that out loud, Tiana mentally snapped at the racetrack employee. Worried about pickpockets, she put her coins into her wallet and hurriedly left the venue before she drew any attention.

From that day on, Tiana became obsessed with dragon racing. Provided there were races that day, she was at the racetrack whenever she wasn't looking for a job. She no longer had any intention of working there—becoming an employee would rob her of the ability to buy tickets.

She eventually gave up on the job search, as it was a waste of time, and spent the days when the track was closed researching dragon racing. She found all the data she could about the dragons, such as which ones ran the fastest in which situations, and began to study it closely.

Tiana was both fortunate and unfortunate. Her education was a great help; she had the intelligence and ability to reach conclusions through data gathering and analysis instead of having to rely on superstition and fortune-telling. She won a decent amount as a result. She also never did anything reckless such as borrowing a significant amount of money for a bet that would get her sold off to a brothel if she lost.

Tiana was unfortunate in the sense that her gambling luck was only mediocre. Getting a bet wrong no matter how sure it appeared to be was a part of gambling. She never lost badly enough to quit in despair, but she also never won payouts large enough to make her rich. Instead, her gambling slowly chipped away at her savings. When she finally returned to her senses, she realized she was in trouble.

“...I can't pay rent.”

The apartment Tiana chose was modest for a noble, but there were cheaper, dodgier locations she could have chosen. She would be kicked out if she couldn't pay rent, which was due in one week. She would manage if she took out a loan, but she couldn't trust herself with the money. *I have to find an income, no matter the job*, she thought.

“My only choice left...is to become an adventurer...”

Feeling glum, Tiana walked to an Adventurers Guild. Becoming an

adventurer would allow her to make money with her ability alone—her academic history and birth would have no bearing. There was one problem, however: Novice adventurers needed to form a party. The female receptionist at the guild told her that beginners were forbidden from venturing into labyrinths alone.

“There are others here like you who want to become adventurers, so why not try searching for them?” the receptionist suggested, and Tiana did just that. She noticed that there were a lot of posters on the wall recruiting party members. She was examining one of them when a handsome man approached her.

“Hey, are you a mage? Wanna join our party?” he asked. Just then, Tiana’s eyes turned murderous. “...Oh, uh, my bad. I just realized my party is already full. Sorry about that!”

“Huh? Wait, I’m also looking for...,” Tiana started, but the man hurried away from her before she could say “party members.” The glare wasn’t his fault, really; it was just that seeing cheerful and handsome men evoked memories of the one who dumped her and ruined her life, which put her visibly on guard.

If not for that issue, she would have had no trouble finding members. She might even have been recruited by a mid-ranking party, leaving her no need to form a party with novices. Tiana’s magic skill was the real deal. She may have only studied the art in school, but her chief instructor valued practical experience, so she had training in killing beasts and weaker monsters with magic. Judging by fighting strength alone, she was much more skilled than the rookie adventurers around her.

However, the sight of a person of her level warily searching for rookie adventurers only ended up scaring people, and no one approached her. She failed to form a party and had to leave when the guild closed.

The adventurers flowed out of the building and down to a neighboring bar. Unable to go against the crowd, Tiana ended up being funneled into the bar along with them. She was hungry, so she decided she may as well take the opportunity to eat.

“I’m alone,” she told an employee, and she was shepherded to a table that already had a customer. The counter was apparently full, so she had to share.

The customer was a young man with black hair and a nimble-looking physique. Given his leather armor, he was likely a light warrior or a scout. The bar was mainly populated by rookie adventurers, but the wear on his dark-green leather armor indicated he had some experience already. His presence was also strangely intimidating as he sat alone at the table.

He looked about the same age as Tiana, but she guessed he had

been through countless battles. The sternness in his eyes attested to that. *He's in an awful mood...though I'm hardly one to talk.*

Before she knew it, two more adventurers had been led to their table. One was a tall clergyman, and unusually enough, the other was a dragonian woman.

Tiana figured they all had problems of their own. But she had it worst of all. *I can't do anything to help them. Besides, if anyone needs help, it's me,* she thought, deciding to ignore them.

The rookie adventurers at the other tables all looked like they were having the time of their lives. Tiana's table was the only one in heavy silence. After a long wait, an employee finally brought the food and drinks they ordered to the table with a by-the-book "Please enjoy." No one responded.

Tiana chugged the tepid ale, and the frustration she had kept bottled up inside tumbled from her mouth.

“““““I'll never trust anyone again!”””””

Zem the Priest / Falsely Accused Pedophile / Playboy



The town Zem lived in was famous for its medicine. As it was the closest outpost to the front line during the war against demons, demand for the healing arts was high, and the priests of the divine god Medora studied both magical and herbal remedies at their sanctuaries. Zem was one of those priests.

“Father Zem! I picked some herbs!”

A teenage girl raced into Zem’s treatment room located in the sanctuary.

“Oh, Myril. Thank you. Here is a reward for you.”

“Thank you!”

Zem gave her a copper coin and patted her on the head, and she wriggled as if it tickled. Zem was a tall man, and Myril was short for her age. Only about ten years separated them, but anyone seeing them for the first time would have thought them father and daughter.

“Is there anything else I can do for you? I’ll help with the medicine!” Myril offered.

“Do not worry; I can handle that myself,” Zem responded, dodging her offer as she tugged persistently at his uniform.

Myril was still a child. Zem was about to create a medicinal compound, which required sanitary considerations and precise measurements. He also had to work with a poisonous flower. He could not allow someone her age to help with that kind of work.

“Really? I swear I can do it,” Myril protested.

“I will teach you how to do it after you get a little better at math,” Zem assured.

“Oh, come on, that’s what you *always* say!”

“Do not fret. You are a smart girl. Studying will be no problem for you if you apply yourself.”

“Don’t treat me like a child... Do you hate women who are bad at studying, Father Zem?”

Zem was used to dealing with kids. The sanctuary doubled as an orphanage, and the older kids looked after the younger ones. Zem was an orphan, too. He had taken care of many kids younger than himself, and he was not going to give in to Myril, no matter how pretty she had become. He had also chosen to live the rest of his life as a priest of Medora.

“My personal taste in women does not matter. You should work hard to ensure yourself a fulfilling life,” Zem answered.

“You always say that, too! I know what you mean, but I’m a girl. I’m going to be married someday, so I shouldn’t interfere with the work of men,” Myril said.

“Mylril, that’s...”

“If you’re that worried about my future...”

Myril grabbed one of Zem’s wrists and tiptoed, puckering her lips to kiss him, but he stopped her.

“Mylril,” Zem said sternly.

Myril braced herself for a scolding. “Don’t look at me like that,” she responded.

“Haah... Listen to me, Myril. I am a priest. I do not intend on involving myself romantically with anyone.”

“But there are some priests who are married!”

“They were either already married when they became priests or got married after quitting. You cannot get married while serving as a priest, and I have no plans to leave my role,” Zem lectured matter-of-factly.

“So you’re saying you’d follow the rules even if you found someone you love?”

“Priests aren’t allowed to fall in love in the first place, so that situation would never arise.”

“You liar! Nobody sticks to that! Everyone is seeing a woman in secret but you!”

Myril threw the basket of herbs at Zem and ran out of the room.

“Oh goodness...” Zem sighed to himself. Girls were hard to please at that age.

Zem was popular with women. He was tall and handsome, he had glossy brown hair, and his voice was low and calming. He was the embodiment of a young ideal priest.

He was also serious about his work. He was inflexibly straitlaced and didn’t save money or accept bribes. As a result, it was rare for women his age to take an interest in him as a candidate for marriage.

He was, however, fawned over by members of the opposite sex who had no interest in marriage, such as older women...and younger girls like Myril.

Zem had always received such affection and was used to it. That was also why he was oblivious to the jealousy and ill will building toward him in the sanctuary.

Myril felt dejected as she raced out of the treatment room. Helping Zem wasn't considered a chore to the girls of the sanctuary; it was a privilege that gave them an opportunity to receive compliments from him. Myril had used every method she could think of to gain that chance.

She had maneuvered herself to the highest social standing among girls her age through a process of threatening and bullying, and occasionally soothing and befriending others. After much work, she finally gained the privilege to work by Zem's side, and she was trying to enjoy it for all it was worth. If Zem desired it, she was willing to go beyond kisses and give him her body.

But Zem had stuck to his principles as an adult and a priest. He hadn't just avoided her approaches; he refused to give her or anyone else among the girls in the orphanage any kind of preferential treatment. Myril thought that was unfair. All the girls who loved him, including herself, drove themselves crazy with the plotting and jealousy born from their efforts to spend time with him. Despite that, Zem just maintained his pure ideals as if their suffering had nothing to do with him. He wouldn't give her the attention she deserved, no matter how hard she worked.

"I think I'm starting to hate Zem."

Myril was one of the most beautiful and mature in appearance among the girls her age, and she became very popular with the boys in the orphanage around the time she turned fourteen. Even adults would do whatever she asked after a little enticing. Other than Zem, that was.

He was the only man who wouldn't become hers, and he happened to be the most handsome one in town. At first, she was only curious about him, but her feelings for him became real once she got to know him. He spoke kindly and treated everyone fairly. He was the ideal man.

But that affection was beginning to turn into something else. The more time she spent with Zem, the more her desire turned to angst. She was gripped by the thought that she would never be as good a person as him, and she even found his lack of worldly desires frightening.

But Zem was a man. She was sure the day would come when he

performed immoral, selfish actions, just like she did. Myril looked forward to that day as she continued her efforts to seduce him, and her wicked feelings of love continued to grow.

Every time before they met, she would give herself a thorough check in the mirror. She would try to toy with him using suggestive language and always attempt to hold his hand or intentionally trip so she could cling onto him. Despite all her efforts, Zem still didn't give her the attention she wanted.

If she ultimately proved unable to seduce Zem, Myril would have to accept a hard truth about herself—that she wasn't an irresistible young seductress, just a puny nymphomaniac.

"God, this sucks..."

Wishing to be alone, Myril headed for the sanctuary's rear garden. She didn't want anyone to see her face right now. The garden was always empty because the person who managed it was a hopeless slacker, making it the perfect place for a private conversation.

"...Are you serious? That Goody Two-shoes is going to be promoted to a high priest?"

"The chief priest is off his rocker. Why does he like him so much?"

"If only we had some dirt to sabotage him with... Crap."

Myril happened upon a group of mid-level priests when she reached the garden. She could tell from their conversation that they were also jealous of Zem. If she had been a little younger, she would have derided them for being terrible people. If she had been a little older, she would have fled to avoid being wrapped up in any trouble. Instead, she was at that dangerous age when a child began to lose their innocence but retained their feeling of omnipotence.

"Hey, you guys," she said.

"Wh-who's there?!" one of the men reacted.

Myril watched the flustered middle priests and licked her lips. "Can you tell me what you were talking about in more detail?"

Zem was devoting himself to preparing medicine and treating the injured, as per usual. His treatment was gentle and without error—he was very skilled and received plenty of patients who did not just come to ogle at his good looks. There were many people lined up outside his treatment room on this day as well.

He was currently prescribing medicine to a mother and child who caught a cold, and the mother was lavishing him with praise.

"Thank you so much, Father Zem. It is such a great help having a person like you around," she said.

"No need to thank me. I am simply doing my job," Zem replied.

"Oh, by the way, I heard something about you being promoted to a high priest."

Zem knit his brows. Talk of that promotion had reached him as well. Priests normally achieved high priesthood once they gained sufficient experience. A lot of training was needed, which included going on a pilgrimage to receive letters of recommendation from sanctuaries in various lands, or devoting oneself to a journey of societal service in which one performed tasks such as killing monsters and giving relief to the poor. Zem was in his twenties and had yet to go on a journey of training or a pilgrimage. The promotion would be nonsensical, and he made it clear to the chief priest that he was going to decline.

"That is not going to happen. I am too young," Zem responded.

"I suppose so... I know all of us patients would be grateful for it, though."

Zem forced a smile and ignored the woman's words. A promotion would make him stand out too much and invite jealousy. Thinking that, he decided he shouldn't take her praise seriously.

Unfortunately, it was already too late.

"Move aside! Is Zem there?"

"Wh-what's going on?!" a patient shouted.

Five of Zem's fellow priests suddenly forced their way through the crowd. The bewildered patients stared at the newly arrived priests and Zem in turn.

"What is the matter, you all?" Zem asked.

"Ha, he's shameless!" one of the priests yelled back.

The five men were all mid-level priests, just like Zem. They were glowering at him as if he was a criminal.

"...I apologize, but I cannot comment until you tell me why you are here," he said.

"Still you feign ignorance?! You have no right to call yourself a priest, you depraved sinner!" another priest screamed.

"Once again, I do not know what this is about."

This isn't getting anywhere, Zem thought.

While the surrounding patients sensed that something was off, not one of them doubted Zem. What one of the priests said next, however, perplexed everyone.

"You are under suspicion of raping a little girl."

"What?! That is nonsense," Zem answered. He obviously knew he had done no such thing, and even the patients thought it was probably a misunderstanding. The priests seemed to delight in their confusion.

"If you refuse to confess, we have no choice but to bring your crime to light right here... Bring her in!"

A priest who was waiting outside the room ushered in a girl. Her eyes were wet from crying, and her hair was disheveled—it certainly appeared as if she had been abused.

“Myril! What happened?!” Zem shouted, jumping to his feet with surprise. He tried to go to the girl’s side, but the priests stopped him, and Myril screamed.

“Yes! This is the man who raped me... I trusted you, Father Zem!”

“Wh-what are you saying, Myril?” Zem asked.

“Give it up already, you sinner! Take him away!” a priest yelled.

The child Zem had been treating stood up and protested. “Father Zem has been treating people here all day!”

The child didn’t realize how reckless that was. The priests glared at the kid. “Do you mean to challenge the word of a priest, you brat?!” one of them bellowed.

“P-please stop! My child was only joking!” the mother said, holding a hand over her child’s mouth before prostrating herself before the priest.

Priesthood was a sacred profession. The members of this order were below nobles and had many obligations, but they possessed a variety of privileges ordinary citizens lacked. Even their healing and charitable work was performed for Medora, and people had no right to interfere with their duties. If anyone resisted here, the priests had maces to change their minds.

“Please, do not hurt anyone!” Zem shouted. The mid-level priests laughed derisively.

“If you don’t want this situation to escalate, I recommend you behave yourself and follow us.”

“Grk...!”

It was blatantly obvious how unnatural the events leading up to Zem’s arrest were. Naturally, the citizens who were indebted to him, and the women who had feelings for him protested.

The narrative changed when a new discovery came to light. Poison was found on the shelves in Zem’s treatment room. There was poison used for paralysis, poison to make the target feel fatigued, and even poison that caused arousal and was used as an aphrodisiac. The aphrodisiac was the biggest problem, and the half-empty bottle was evidence it had been used. Even worse, patients came forward, having seen Zem picking poisonous grass used as an ingredient for the aphrodisiac.

The line between medicine and poison was paper thin. Zem had performed careful analysis of many texts and was well versed in his art. He often used poison grass as an ingredient, and creating compounds containing poison was a piece of cake for him. It was also possible that a priest planted the poison in Zem’s treatment room while pretending to inspect it; that would have been an easy task.

There were few citizens who understood any of that, however. At

the very least, the patients who lived in poverty and couldn't even read were incapable of seeing through the deception.

Meanwhile, the priests with some knowledge of medicine kept silent to avoid any attention falling on them. Others gloated because a rival had been eliminated.

Three months passed.

After three months of imprisonment, Zem was excommunicated from the sanctuary and driven out of town through the back gate.

There were a couple of reasons for the long length of his imprisonment. The sanctuary waited until the suspicion and anger that he was falsely accused died down, banishing him once the scandal had come to be accepted as the truth. By doing that, they avoided attracting any ire. The priests also trickled out a variety of rumors to strengthen the believability of the scandal, and the degree to which they spread through the information-hungry populace surprised even them.

The other reason for the long imprisonment was just as important.

"Is that Zem? How wretched."

"It looks like the rumors were true..."

That was to rob Zem of his good looks that had made him so popular. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes were sunken, and his clothes were dirty and battered. He was still a good deal more handsome than average, but he looked haggard enough to disillusion those who loved him for his appearance.

"...You did this to yourself, Zem," Myril muttered angrily as she watched from afar. Zem was at fault because he wouldn't accept her love. He should have given her what she wanted. She repeated it to herself over and over, drowning any rising guilt in stubborn vice.

All the girls in the orphanage doubted Myril, but she had played the perfect victim, and the priests believed her. No one was able to claim that she lied in her confession. Zem was not seen nor heard from in public once between his imprisonment and his banishment.

In the end, Zem was exiled because those in power in the sanctuary decided he was guilty. It was as simple as that. Even if someone could have reasoned out the suppression and behind-the-scenes maneuvering that went into that decision, they could not have raised a public objection.

Speculation spread after his banishment that he must have secretly been up to some shady business. Rather than live with the guilt and fear that they abandoned a falsely accused person and that there was a girl who was able to ruin a man's life with lies, it was much easier for the people of the town to accept the story that the evil Zem got what he deserved.

“Get lost, you pervert!”

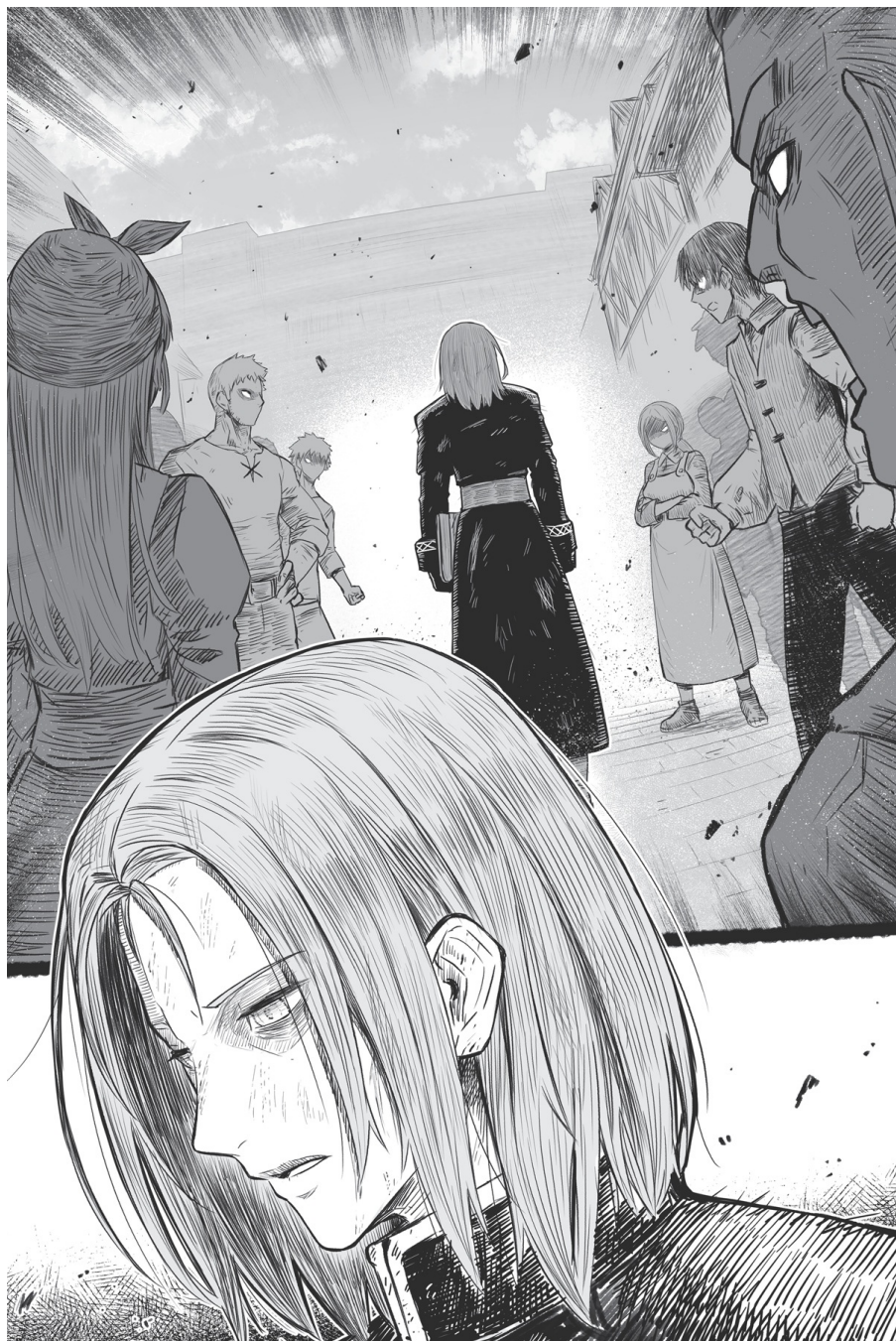
“We were fools to ever trust you!”

The town that received protection from the sanctuary exiled Zem. Betrayal, false accusation, insult, and violence—these were the injustices that ruined him and led the populace to jeer and pelt him with stones.

But perhaps this was just the true beginning of Zem’s life.

Zem muttered to himself as he walked along the highway alone. “Why did this have to happen?” He had been repeating those words ever since he was ruined by his fellow priests and Myril. No one had answered his question.

He was interrogated two or three days after he was arrested and then left almost entirely alone during his three-month imprisonment. The guards might have been forbidden from speaking to him, because they didn’t answer any of his questions, either. The word *Why?* circled endlessly in his mind.



The lonely three months in prison wore on Zem's mind and even altered his face. After he was released, everyone turned on him immediately once they saw how his appearance had changed. That was the first time he ever realized how much he had benefited from his looks.

But at this point, Zem's soul had yet to be corrupted. That he felt shame at his unawareness of the advantages of his handsome features was proof of that. He still had hope that he could return to the sanctuary one day and clear his name.

Though he abandoned that hope after an incident that occurred when he ventured into a post town, which served as a local post office headquarters, following his banishment.

"Welcome to my inn, Father! Are you on some kind of pilgrimage?"

"...Yes, something like that."

In a post town that was a week's journey by foot from his hometown, he met a woman named Velkia. She was a widowed inn proprietress around thirty years old. She had no children and managed the inn while looking after her parents.

Her guests consisted only of adventurers. This town was right on the path connecting Teran, the Labyrinth City, to the national border, making it a lively place with much traffic from horse- and dragon-drawn carriages. Velkia's inn catered to passing adventurers, and looking after the ones with less experience was part of her job.

Velkia used to adventure as a warrior. She took marriage as an opportunity to open an inn. She was big and strong for a woman, and while she was a caring person, she was perfectly willing to give a misbehaving customer a good kick in the rear. She had no issue running the inn by herself.

Lately, however, she had been struggling with back pain and wondering whether she should scale down her business. She didn't have many customers at the moment because winter just ended, but it wouldn't be long before the inn was packed, and it would remain so through the summer. She was considering either hiring employees or reducing the amount of work to be done.

That was when Zem arrived. He noticed her back pain and said, "Would you like me to heal it?" Unlike small injuries, healing a chronic issue like back pain required a decent amount of skill. Thinking it couldn't hurt to let him try, Velkia dubiously accepted his offer.

Her face lit up when Zem used the healing spell on her. The pain disappeared from her body as if it had never been there at all. Zem was a talented healer, and even treatment that required a fair share of

skill was a walk in the park for him.

“Oh my goodness! How many months has it been since I’ve felt this comfortable?!” Velkia exclaimed.

“Your back pain will decrease if you watch your posture when lifting heavy objects and when going to sleep. Please take care of yourself,” Zem said.

“Oh, hold on. I have to reward you for giving me such wonderful treatment...”

Zem interrupted her by shaking his head. “Please, do not worry about paying me.”

“Huh... Do you not use your talent for money?” Velkia asked.

“It is not that I have no interest in money. I am just happy to have a wonderful person like you giving me thanks,” he explained.

Zem had already been rewarded sufficiently. He hadn’t told her anything about his background, but it had been a long time since he’d talked to someone who didn’t ignore, insult, or look down on him. Just being able to speak with her normally satisfied him. That was why he called her a wonderful person.

Velkia, however, got the wrong idea.

“Wow... Aren’t you a priest, though? Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Velkia asked.

Zem also misinterpreted her words. Collecting alms after performing treatment was part of a priest’s job. No matter what a priest said, they couldn’t live without an income. It was forbidden by the sanctuary to perform treatment for free in times of peace. But Zem was no longer a priest and didn’t have to hold himself to those rules.

Velkia thought he was requesting a different kind of reward. Zem didn’t notice when she teasingly hinted that he was a naughty priest for trying to seduce a woman he just met.

“I am a former priest. It is...a long story, but I left that life,” Zem said.

“I see.” Velkia was convinced he was telling the truth. Now that she thought about it, he didn’t have the pendant that priests wore around their neck. That probably meant he wasn’t currently affiliated with any denomination. A night of fun would be no problem at all.

Velkia didn’t get many guests like Zem. Her usual clientele were rough-and-tumble adventurers. She knew people saw her as mannish and brash. It was her nature, and she didn’t intend to change. The only men who ever made a move on her were adventurers confident—usually overconfident—in their own masculinity.

As such, this was the first time she had ever been courted by a kind gentleman like Zem who knew how to heal. He wouldn’t have been her type if he had been detached and naive like many clergymen, but she was taken by the non-priest-like shadow over his face.

Zem lost his chastity that night.

“You should go to Labyrinth City and become an adventurer.”

It was the next morning. Velkia said that to Zem soon after he woke up.

“You could make plenty of money in this post town, too, with that healing talent of yours. But you know it would be best for you to leave here, don’t you?”

“I... Yes.”

In the end, Zem was overpowered by Velkia and made to learn a woman’s body for the first time. Despite his misgivings, he was a young man, and he ended up enjoying it. If not for the fun he had that night, it probably wouldn’t have been long before he died or hung himself.

Zem would have been tormented by guilt if he had still been a priest, but he was well aware he was just a former clergyman without a place in the world. He was ready to allow himself the pleasure of indulging in a woman’s body.

When a man spends his first night with a woman, words flow from him as easily as wine from a broken bottle. Before he knew it, he was telling Velkia about everything that happened to him. He didn’t stop with the false charges. He also told her that he wanted to clear his name and become a trusted priest again, even though he realized how difficult that would be. While he knew he should forgive the priests and Myril for their wrongdoing and reflect on his own actions, he actually hated them so much that he wanted to kill them; he deeply resented the innocent people of his hometown; he had lost all desire to live. He laid bare thoughts that he wasn’t even aware of in his heart.

Velkia felt both relief and unease as she listened. She was relieved because if she hadn’t embraced Zem that night, he probably would have died on the side of the road in despair. He was betrayed and hurt by people he trusted, but he still didn’t abandon his belief in healing other people, and so he treated the back pain of a proprietress he had never met. The thought of such a good person dying was unbearable.

She felt uneasy because she didn’t think she would be able to save his heart completely. Velkia tended to be open with sex. She didn’t frequently sleep with passing men like Zem, but it wasn’t rare, either. She also took care of many men who stumbled into her inn. Tying herself to Zem, however, wouldn’t lead to a good future for either of them. They may have had a nice night together, but a long-term relationship was doomed to fail.

Velkia knew she wouldn’t be able to remain faithful. She would hurt him one day. It was also hard to imagine Zem resigning himself

to a life of slovenliness while a woman looked after him. Put bluntly, Zem was a little too much for her.

"I want you to make friends, fall in love with a woman, have some fun, and explore the world you've yet to see. I went on many adventures when I was young, too. That's why you should go to Labyrinth City," Velkia said.

That wasn't a difficult conclusion for her to reach. Working as an adventurer was best for people with complicated issues like Zem.

"But...I need to repay you. If not for you, I..." Zem trailed off.

"We're even. You treated me for free, remember? Oh, right. I have some items that'll be useful for you."

Velkia handed Zem a bundle of goods.

"These are..."

It was an old cassock, a secondhand holy book, and a mace. The cassock had no frayed spots or stains, and while the pages of the book were yellow, the binding was in good shape. The mace was rusty here and there, but it would be more than usable with some polishing.

"Many priests work as adventurers as part of their training, but there are also some who become adventurers after giving up priesthood or quitting after violating their precepts. I have these 'cause some idiot left them to pay his lodging charges... You should use them," the woman explained.

"I—I can't accept this much..." Zem protested, but Velkia stopped him. She forced the items upon him with the pushiness of a proprietress and grinned.

"Time for you to get going. Men are supposed to live life facing forward."

Zem left the inn and arrived at Labyrinth City. It was the most prosperous and bustling settlement he had ever seen. There were merchants and adventurers, mages of scholarly talent, clowns in striking makeup performing in circus tents, and priests. The population was mostly human, but elves, dwarves, and even beast people were not rare. It was a dizzying melting pot of races and occupations.

"I should look for an inn first..."

Zem had money to spare. He used his healing magic and knowledge of medicine to support himself on the road from Velkia's inn to Labyrinth City. He understood that performing treatment for free would bring undue suspicion upon him and possibly lead to trouble. He charged slightly less than market value as he healed the sick and wounded, then saved the earnings. Even with the lower prices, he was able to make more than enough because he didn't need to offer payment to the sanctuary. Those who could combat injury and

disease were valued in any era.

"I'll bet the nightlife here is really good... I should get out of the rain and have some fun."

Zem grinned broadly on the side of the road in the pouring rain. He had become acquainted with an unsavory pastime since leaving Velkia's inn—womanizing. He would drink alcohol at hostess clubs that employed beautiful women, and if there was a girl he liked, he would seduce her and sleep with her.

It was a lifestyle Zem could never have imagined when he was a priest. Now that his life had turned out this way, he thought with defiance that he might as well enjoy it to the fullest. He no longer hesitated at all when it came to earning money with his healing magic. He had given his chastity to Velkia, and his feeling of guilt toward spending money on women vanished. Zem had become a textbook example of an excommunicated priest who indulged in desires that were once forbidden.

The one thing that remained rooted deep was a fear of younger girls. Just seeing one before him reminded him of Myril and set his hands trembling. He avoided them as he continued to enjoy the city's nightlife.

But he wasn't used to this lifestyle yet. Nightlife was something one needed to ease themselves into. He had enjoyed himself a good amount since arriving in the city and even found some favorite restaurants. Eventually, however, he realized how much the nightlife had burned through his wallet. Labyrinth City's hostess clubs were all expensive.

"...I need to focus on work soon."

In this country, former priests not affiliated with any sanctuary or people who studied healing magic on their own were not allowed to start a hospital or a treatment facility. They were allowed to set up a stall outdoors and treat people that way, but those operations were seen as less trustworthy than official treatment centers, making it difficult to obtain well-paying customers and run a successful business. Using healing magic to earn money on the road wasn't difficult, but within a city there was much more competition.

For that reason, Zem followed Velkia's advice and decided to pursue becoming an adventurer. He arrived at an Adventurers Guild called Newbies. A woman at a hostess club told him that most people hoping to become adventurers in Labyrinth City started there.

"...That's why you need to form a party to become an adventurer," the receptionist told him.

"Oh, really...?" Zem responded. He didn't know the first thing about the profession, and so he did as the receptionist said and approached adventurers looking for party members.

Unfortunately, no one invited Zem into their party. He ended up staying out late at a hostess club the previous night and got very little sleep at the cheap inn he found. He still looked slightly intoxicated and smelled of women's makeup, making it obvious to anyone that he spent the night at such an establishment. That in combination with his priest garb made him look very suspicious.

The distrustful gazes of the adventurers throughout the room brought back dreadful memories. Their eyes were just like the people of his hometown when he was banished. "Working as an adventurer may not be for me." Zem sighed to himself. Searching for party members got him nowhere. It was a vicious cycle of rejection.

Zem was forced to leave when Newbies closed. Whether or not they were able to find a party, everyone from the guild crowded into a neighboring bar. Zem was unable to resist the flow of people and ended up in the bar as well. He was undeniably hungry; he hadn't eaten anything since the previous night.

Sadly, the food at the bar was plain; it was even worse than the meals they were served at the sanctuary. His melancholy over the food was amplified by the atmosphere around him. The three adventurers sitting at his table looked just as depressed as him. The contrast between their table and the rest of the bar couldn't have been greater; they looked like they were in a dark prison cell, while the rest of the customers were smiling and having a merry time.

"I'm a priest. I'll take care of the healing!"

"Sounds great! I'm an ax warrior! I killed a hundred kobolds back home."

"From this day on we're a party—no, a family! Nice to meet you all!"

Family. Zem's temper flared at that word. All who were raised at the sanctuary should have thought of each other as family. Whether they lost their real parents or were abandoned by them, the kids raised under Medora's divine protection should have been like brothers and sisters. The priests running the sanctuary should have been like fathers and mothers.

Zem was betrayed by that family. The simple, idyllic joy audible in the voices of the adventurers was more than he could take.

Who needs a family anyway. It's all so stupid. They will only betray you in the end.

""""""I'll never trust anyone again!""""""

Karan the Dragonian Warrior / Fraud Victim / Solo Gourmet



The proud dragonians had a mission: to serve a human hero and save the world.

That said, the world wasn't currently in any danger. The war between the humans and the demons ended ten years ago, and there were no dark forces ruling the world. The times were peaceful.

The dragonians, however, were facing a crisis. They participated in the war as mercenaries, and many did not come home. A substantial amount of people died, but many simply decided to remain in the lands of the humans. The dragonian settlement was a rural, insular society that had remained unchanged in its tranquility for centuries. The dragonians, who joined the war as mercenaries, found the countries of men fascinating with their melting pot of cultures and convenient, developed way of living. There were also many who fell in love with a human during the war and started a family.

Karan was the third daughter of the chief of the declining dragonian population. Everyone loved her for her bright personality. She was stronger than any man, and while she wasn't always the most intelligent, people put up with it because of her excellent potential as a warrior.

It was inevitable that she would eventually show interest in the outside world. No matter how strong she felt she was, she only had her small village to compare herself against. She wanted to see the world and test her strength, and she was attracted by the dragonian mission of serving the hero. As such, she resolved to leave the village and go on a journey.

But Karan was lacking in one aspect. Because she grew up in a

village with a declining population, she could count the number of friends around her age on one hand. She had zero friends who were her exact age. Most of the adults in the village were old, with few at a working age. She had been spoiled growing up, and she didn't yet know the coldness of the world or the ugliness that people were capable of.

"Pick that up and give it a close look, missy."

"Okay."

Karan did as the street male vendor in Labyrinth City said and picked up a silver pendant. The hanging ornament was shaped like a swan, and she was captivated by its elegant design. The only problem was its hefty price tag.

"That's two gold coins, which is twenty thousand dina. Sorry, but I can't reduce the cost," the man said, holding up two fingers.

Karan was torn. She could afford it if she used the money her parents gave her, but that wasn't money she should waste. After much deliberation, she handed the pendant back to the street vendor. She decided she would come back once she was able to support herself. Rather than repay her friend's kindness while she was still inexperienced, it would be better to wait and give it to him once she showed she could be independent.

She returned the pendant, and the street vendor screamed. "Nooo!"

"Wh-what is it?" Karan asked.

"Don't give me that, missy. You're a dragonian. You need to be more careful!" the man yelled, holding out the pendant for Karan to see. There was a scratch on it that looked like it was left by a sharp claw. "I can't sell it in this state... Oh dear."

"Th-that scratch wasn't me!"

"...I suppose I can't blame you for being careless. It's in your nature. But it's not right to play dumb."

"B-but!"

From the elbow down, dragonians had the arms of a dragon. They were covered in scales and had sharp claws. That was exactly why dragonians always took special care not to injure people they came into close contact with. Karan was not a child, and she knew how to be careful. When the man gave her the pendant, she grabbed it with the insides of her fingers to avoid scratching it. She was sure her claws never touched it.

"You look like you just left the countryside, girl. I'm sorry, but you can't get away with this kind of thing in Labyrinth City," he said.

"..."

"That said, I'm not a monster. I know you didn't mean to scratch

it.”

“...Huh?”

“I’ll reduce the price by half to ten thousand dina. Give me one gold coin. I won’t ask for a full reimbursement, and I’ll give you the scratched pendant.” The street vendor smiled at Karan kindly. She could feel herself being pulled in by his smile.

Ten thousand dina was a lot of money. She could get out of this with just ten thousand dina. Both of those thoughts crossed her mind at the same time. What should she do?

“Think of this as the price of learning your way around this city, missy. Or do you want me to call the Sun Knights and have them mediate for us?” he threatened.

The Order of the Sun Knights was a police organization that protected the peace in Labyrinth City. They kept criminals in check and did their best to maintain justice, but they occasionally arrested people on false charges, and there were many merchants who had bribed them as well. Even if the knights weren’t entirely trustworthy, gaining their attention here would make life in Labyrinth City difficult for her.

Karan felt a wave of fear when he mentioned the Sun Knights. Just then, a man put his hand on the street vendor’s shoulder.

“Hey, you got a bone to pick with Karan?” he asked.

“Callios!” Karan smiled joyfully and called the man’s name.

He was a handsome man with long blond hair and a longsword on his back. His permanent smile made everyone he talked to feel like a friend. The street vendor, however, made an uncomfortable expression in response to the smiling Callios whose hand was on his shoulder.

“Sorry, Karan. Gettin’ our payout at the guild took kinda long,” Callios apologized.

“I-it’s okay,” Karan responded, shaking her head.

Despite his friendly demeanor, he was the leader of White Heron, Karan’s adventuring party, making him essentially her boss. That wasn’t all—he was also the person who approached her when she arrived in Labyrinth City without a clue of what to do. Callios invited her into his party and looked after her, for which she was grateful. Karan looked down, blushing from embarrassment that he found her in this predicament.

“I told you to call me whenever you go shoppin’, didn’t I? I don’t mind helpin’ out if you want something.”

“O-okay.”

“Anyway. Back to you,” Callios said, returning his attention to the street vendor.

“Wh-what’s your deal?” the man asked.

“Didn’t you hear me? I asked if you have a bone to pick with

Karan.”

“N-not exactly... This dragonian girl ruined my twenty thousand dina pendant. I can’t just let her walk free. Look at this scratch. It’s unsellable now.”

Karan ducked her head, afraid Callios would be mad at her. It wasn’t like he had ever yelled at her before, but just imagining it set her quaking in her boots. She didn’t want him to abandon her.

“S-sorry, Callios...”

“Hey, Karan. Try scratching this pendant,” Callios said.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” the street vendor yelled.

“It’s already unsellable, right? What does another scratch matter?” Callios asked.

“I-I’ll only allow that after I receive ten thousand dina for it,” the man insisted.

“Fine, I’ll pay for it. But you know what you did.”

Callios pulled a gold coin out of his pocket and gave it to the street vendor. The man’s face went pale as he accepted the money; he didn’t look the least bit happy about being paid.

“All right, Karan. Go ahead and scratch it. Scratching a pendant feels really wrong... This is kinda exciting.”

“Huh? B-but...”

“It’s fine. Just do it.”

Karan did as Callios said and timidly pressed a claw against it. The silver screeched as she scratched it. She closed her eyes reflexively, afraid of looking at the scratch.

“Hmm. Can you make a smaller scratch, Karan?” Callios asked.

“Huh? I—I can’t,” Karan stammered.

“Exactly,” Callios said, looking at the street vendor with a cocky smile. “Karan couldn’t have made such a clean scratch with her claws. This was just a ploy to sell a damaged item.”

As Callios said, the first scratch was thin and perfectly straight. By contrast, the scratch Karan just applied was large, clumsy, and visibly different in shape.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with you!” the street vendor shouted.

“Wha—? I’m the one who paid for it. You’re not making any sense. Also...”

Callios reached into the street vendor’s pocket with speed that would have amazed a pickpocket and felt around.

“Wh-what the hell?! What are you—?”

“I knew it.” Callios pulled out a swan pendant without a single scratch. “You switched this with the scratched pendant and pretended like she scratched it.”

“Oh!” Karan gasped.

“You could’ve also tried swapping the good pendant for the damaged one when you wrapped it. That’s an old trick.”

Karan didn’t look closely at the pendant when she returned it to the street vendor. She was lost in thought about whether she should buy it, giving the man the opportunity to take advantage of her.

“So what should we do here? I could call over the Sun Knights...,” Callios threatened.

The street vendor was visibly sweating. Anyone could see he was guilty. Karan was captivated by the skillful way Callios handled this, and she was surprised when he turned to her for a decision.

“Hey, Karan. Do you want this pendant?”

“Huh? Y-yeah, but...”

“Cool. All right, we’re gonna take this pendant instead of handing you to the Sun Knights. I’ll take that gold coin back, too.”

“Dammit!” the man yelled.

“That makes this a free gift. Lookin’ at this closely, this isn’t worth twenty thousand dina. Two thousand dina would make more sense.”

The street vendor turned away from Callios’s mocking gaze. His response made it clear he was guilty as charged. Despite that, Karan politely accepted the pendant from Callios.

“Callios,” Karan began.

“What’s up?” he responded.

“Um...thank you.”

Callios smiled and patted Karan’s head. She couldn’t imagine anything more comfortable than the warmth of his hand.

“All right, Karan. Time to get back to work,” he said.

“Okay. Where are we going next?” Karan responded.

“Pot Snake Cave. It’s a difficult labyrinth. Are you up for it?”

“Yeah, you can count on me!”

Karan wanted to repay his kindness by living up to his expectations. She nodded enthusiastically.

A bright-red light flashed inside the dark labyrinth.

“Take this! *Fire Dragon Slash!*”

Karan swung her large two-handed greatsword down in a wide circle. The force behind her extremely heavy weapon was enough to cut through the hard shell of the silver stag—a giant stag beetle—and sever it into two pieces. It wasn’t just a simple downswing—she also burned the section of the monster her sword passed through to a crisp. Her most powerful move imbued her trusty Dragonbone Sword with the divine protection of the fire dragon and gave it the ability to burn through anything.

“That’s our Karan! You’re amazing!”

“Not even an S rank would be a match for you!”

“Ha-ha, stop it,” Karan said, smiling proudly despite herself. The two men praising her profusely were the mage and priest of White Heron. They were also friends of Callios. They bent down to begin disassembling the severed silver stag for materials.

The silver stag beetle was one meter in length. They were difficult enemies that could only be damaged by physical or magical attacks of considerable strength. The danger of taking them on was made worth it by the spoils—the hard yet light pincers and the exoskeleton sold for high prices. The dungeon they were in, Pot Snake Cave, was populated by tough monsters like the silver stag, but it was known as a place where you could make a lot of money.

“...Hey. Are you sure you don’t want me to help?” Karan asked.

“Yeah, this work is below you. Take some time to rest!”

“But that’s not fair to you...”

“Come on, you did all the work killing this thing. You’d put us out of a job if we let you do any more, so leave this to us.”

The mage and the priest didn’t look up from their work as they responded to Karan. They were reliable companions, but she couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

“Callios...,” she began.

“It’s okay, Karan. They’ve got this,” Callios said.

“But I should help at least a little...”

“Hey. I appreciate the thought, and you’re right to ask. But adventurers have to trust each other. It’s important to entrust some work to your party members.”

“O-okay.”

“Also, you don’t know how to dissect a body, you’re illiterate, and you can’t do math. Leave that stuff to those who can do it. You can rely on us anytime. That way you’ll avoid being roped into scams like the one earlier today.”

“I guess so, but...”

Karan clutched the swan pendant in her pocket.

Callios touched her shoulder gently. “Karan. There’s nothing wrong with entrusting things you’re not good at to other people. Just trust your party members and focus on what you’re good at. If you do that, we’ll be famous adventurers in no time. Everyone will see us as heroes,” he said, not letting her help at all.

Karan had incredible talent as a warrior. She worked hard despite her physical gifts, and D-rank labyrinths that were normally difficult for novice adventurers were a piece of cake for her. But she was still young—not even twenty—so she didn’t think it was right to let the others do all the work just because she was strong. She was happy to be relied on for combat, but their refusal to let her do anything else gave her a strange sense of unease. Though every time she began to

feel that way, Callios consoled and encouraged her.

"There's a really strong monster on the next floor. We're countin' on you, Karan," Callios said, clapping her on the shoulder.

"Okay, I'll be ready!" Karan responded, her apprehension leaving her right away. It was in her nature to focus on the task in front of her over more difficult issues. That was much easier for her.

"The next floor down is the last one. The boss is there. It's a strong monster called a pot snake. Know anything about it?" Callios asked.

"No," Karan answered.

"It's a snake that hides in a giant pot bigger than a person. It's very cautious, and there's nothin' you can do while it's hunkerin' down."

"It hides in a pot? Will magic not work?"

"Yep, the pot repels spells. But if you strike the pot as hard as you can, the pot snake will get angry and come out. It goes after the person who struck the pot, so you gotta kill it when it emerges."

"...Oh."

"Sorry to ask this, but...can you take that risk for us, Karan? We'll back you up, of course. Right, everyone?" Callios asked.

"Yeah, we got your back! I'll hit it with my fire spells!" the mage proclaimed.

"Leave the healing to me," the priest said.

Karan thought of those two as important friends as well. If they were telling her to trust them, she decided she wouldn't think too hard about it and just focus on fighting.

"...Okay, I'll do it!"

The pot snake was the boss on the bottom floor of Pot Snake Cave. It was a very difficult enemy, and all adventurers who could kill it were looked upon with awe.

White Heron typically hunted in labyrinths suitable for D-rank adventurers. Taking on the boss of a C-rank labyrinth like the pot snake was a bit out of their league. One needed strength to penetrate its hard scales, speed to keep up with its fast movement, equipment to guard against its deadly poison, and most of all, a leader with the ability to stay focused and make the correct calls over a long battle. It could not be defeated unless the party and each individual member were sufficiently skilled.

"Okay... Karan, proceed as we discussed. Save Fire Dragon Slash until the end," Callios instructed.

However, there is a surefire way to kill the pot snake. Not many people were aware of it, but even among those who knew, only a few would attempt it.

"Sure thing, Callios!" Karan responded. She hurled herself against

the giant pot the snake was hiding in and knocked it over.

“Sssssss!”

The snake angrily rushed out of the pot.

“Be careful, Karan!”

“Okay!”

The snake turned toward Karan, angry at her for knocking its pot over, and charged. It looked as if it wanted to swallow her whole. She swung her greatsword and blocked its attack. Dragonians were stronger than humans, and a snake this size would be a cinch for a full-fledged dragonian warrior. Even Karan, who was still growing as a warrior, deflected its attacks easily.

“Give her support!” Callios ordered, and the mage shot a fire spell called Fireball. The snake was focused entirely on Karan, and the spell hit it directly.

“Sssss!”

The snake’s anger intensified, and it glared at the adventurers. Something strange happened next—the snake’s body glowed a sickening green.

“Callios! What’s that?!” Karan shouted.

“It’s just trying to intimidate us! We’re gonna prepare the finishing blow! Hold it right there!” he responded.

“O-okay!”

Feeling anxious, Karan continued to fight the snake. She had trouble cutting through its thick scales. The strategy they discussed was for Karan to act as a decoy and divert its attacks while the mage supported her. While they were buying time, the priest was going to strengthen Callios with support magic so he could kill it in one blow.

“Callios! Are you ready?!” Karan called out without turning around.

She trusted them, and those men responded to her trust by backing away quietly as she focused on fighting the snake.

“Sssssss!”

The snake opened its mouth so wide it looked like its jaw would break, and it spouted out poisonous green mist.

“Wh-what is this?! Callios... Help me...”

When a pot snake grows angry and senses critical danger, it responds by spreading a deadly vapor around itself. It was an extremely powerful poison made from mixing the snake’s venom with poisonous insects and flowers from the labyrinth that it gathered inside its pot. They then convert that poison into mist and spit it out, killing any ordinary human immediately.

There were drawbacks to the attack, though. Once the snake exhausted all its poison, it was unable to use the attack again. The poison also served as the snake’s energy, so it was weakened right

after using it.

That left a few ways of dealing with it. One option was to kill the pot snake with a powerful blow before it released the poisonous mist. Equipment that gave one resistance to poison was also useful.

“All right, the poisonous mist has cleared up. We should be fine.”

“Our plan worked.”

The other option was to use someone as a sacrifice.

“Sorry, Karan. Good job takin’ care of the pot snake for us... Though, I guess it took care of you just the same,” Callios mocked.

“Wh-why...?” Karan muttered after collapsing onto the ground. She didn’t have the strength left to lift a finger. It was all she could do to just respond to Callios’s mocking laughter.

“She can still talk... Did the pot snake not have enough poison built up?”

“The poison probably works slower on her ’cause she’s a dragonian. Don’t worry; it was a lethal dose.”

Callios and the mage were surprised to find Karan alive, but they focused on the task at hand before turning to her. They finished off the pot snake that had collapsed limply just like Karan and then deftly tore off the parts that could be sold for money.

Karan had a thought. This was all just part of the plan to kill the pot snake. They kept it a secret from her so she wouldn’t be afraid of the poison. They were surely going to heal her any moment.

“Let’s head out as soon as we’re done collectin’ materials.”

Her hopes were dashed when Callios and the others left her there heartlessly.

“Geez, you’ve gotten good at this, Viper.”

“Stop callin’ me that. I’m Callios now.”

“I hate usin’ different names... What a waste of a good girl, though. She was head over heels for you. You shoulda had some fun with her.”



“I’m not into country bumpkins...especially the poisoned variety.”

“You’ve got a point. Usin’ her now would only make you sick.”

Karan could only lay there as she heard their vulgar conversation. The voices grew smaller until she was left truly alone. It was just her and the pot snake’s carcass and total silence.

Wait... Someone... Save me...

There was no one to hear Karan’s cry.

A whole day passed.

Hmm...?

Karan jolted awake. Her body creaked, and her joints ached, but the torturous pain and heat of the poison were gone.

“Where am I?”

Karan looked around. The room was empty except for her and the corpse of the pot snake. It could hardly be called a corpse anymore. It was only the pitiful remains of the pot snake after all the sellable materials such as its skin and fangs were taken.

“That...wasn’t a dream...”

Karan was devastated. The joy of surviving was nothing next to the sadness of being betrayed by her comrades. Karan even thought it might have been easier if she just died without knowing what actually happened and what didn’t.

All she had left now was her life.

“Oh, I wonder...” Karan reached into her chest pocket and pulled something out. “Yep, the amulet is broken...”

When Karan left the village, her father—the chief of the dragonian people—gave her a few treasures. The first was the Dragonbone Sword. It was no ordinary sword. It was forged from an alloy of dragonsteel—a mineral found in dragon claws and bones—and iron. It was very sturdy and could be enhanced by the fire dragon’s divine protection. Karan couldn’t use her special move Fire Dragon Slash without it.

The second was an amulet called the anti-poison amulet. It was a single-use magic item that activated a strong antitoxin and healing spell when you were in mortal danger as long as you were wearing it. While there were some strong poisons that the anti-poison amulet couldn’t cure, it could handle almost any naturally occurring poison. It took a while for the healing process to complete, but it was undoubtedly an extremely useful item. It was the reason Karan survived.

“I can’t believe it took me less than a year to use...” She felt guilty toward her parents. That thought reminded her of her most important treasure, and the blood drained from her face. It was called a dragon

king gem. It wasn't just a jewel; it was also a magic item that was important to all dragonians.

There was a legend that the dragonian who served the hero gave their master a gem. A tradition was formed imitating that legend wherein a dragonian would give a gem full of mana to a person they acknowledged as worthy of it. The person who received the gem would be blessed with the divine protection that was bestowed upon the dragonians. It was a powerful magic item that allowed other races to wield the strength of a dragon.

That wasn't all—it was also used as a dowry when a dragonian woman married. A person worthy of being labeled the hero by the dragonians hadn't appeared for centuries, so the tradition of serving the hero was little more than a lost ideal. Now the gems were more important for finding a marriage partner.

The type of gem used didn't matter. A diamond or a polished pebble would work all the same. However, Karan was the daughter of the chief, and it would make the entire dragonian race look bad if she used something cheap. The chief's gem was a brilliant ruby larger than any other gem possessed by the dragonian race, and it was filled with a year's worth of the chief's mana. It was the highest quality dragon king gem in existence.

It was currently stored in her party's safe at the inn.

"Oh no!"

Karan had entrusted her possessions to her companions...though she couldn't call them that anymore. She hadn't told anyone about the dragon king gem, but it wouldn't have been surprising if they had heard that all dragonian women were given one. There weren't a lot of dragonians left, but there were many who distinguished themselves during the war. An adventurer likely would have heard about dragon king gems at some point.

"I—I need to hurry!" Karan suppressed her feelings of heartbreak and stood up. Withstanding the loneliness of venturing through a dungeon alone, she began to walk.

It took Karan three days to escape from the labyrinth and another week to return to Labyrinth City. The trip took five times as long as the journey to the bottom of the labyrinth, mostly because she had to move carefully to avoid fighting monsters on her own.

"Huh?! Aren't you Callios's friend?!"

The innkeeper of the inn that White Heron had made their base was shocked to see Karan.

"Is Callios here?!" Karan asked.

"No, he already left. He said you, uh...died in a labyrinth..."

"He lied."

“...Apparently.” The innkeeper nodded, and Karan hung her head miserably.

The innkeeper said that this was an old trick. There have long been adventurers who turned to thievery when a party argued over how to split up treasure or when a companion possessed a valuable item. That was why it was preached that adventurers should be like family. Occasionally, a person became an adventurer who didn't give a damn about that and had a disposition to turn to larceny.

“A-anyway, where are my possessions?! They—”

“Callios and the other two took them. He said he was going to return them to your home. But...”

The innkeeper didn't need to finish his sentence for Karan to understand. There was no way an adventurer who would betray a companion would have been telling the truth.

“I'll report this to the Adventurers Guild, but he's probably an experienced fraudster. He won't be easy to catch... Ah, ma'am! Please wait!”

Karan left without letting the innkeeper finish.

He had helped her when she was in trouble. He had adventured through labyrinths with her. He had put a hand on her shoulder when she needed his help. Was it all...?

“Was it all a lie, Callios...?”

Just then, Karan noticed something in her pocket. It was the swan pendant, the symbol how he saved her. She was going to give it to him along with a set of matching items as a present when she became able to support herself. She'd wanted to buy it in secret even though he told her not to go shopping on her own.

“I don't want this anymore!”

Karan tried to throw it, but she couldn't. She knew it was all a lie, but a part of her wanted to cling to those memories. Why was she so weak? Feeling disappointed in herself and overcome with despair, she began to sob.

“...God dammit, god dammit!”

It suddenly began to rain. Labyrinth City's weather was fickle in the spring. Heavy rain could strike without warning, and today was one of those unlucky days. People vanished from the streets as stalls set up in the vicinity of the inn slowly closed one by one.

Karan was glad for the rain—no one saw her cry like a little girl.

Karan felt saddened again after searching the places that Callios frequented. Nobody knew where he went—or anything about him at all. There was no sign of his collaborators, either. She was always met with one of two responses when she asked about him: People would either look at her with pity for being fooled, or they would chase her

away to avoid being wrapped up in any trouble.

She had no idea where her former companions had gone. Thinking logically, it was most likely that they left Labyrinth City. Selling her dragon king gem would net them enough money to retire from adventuring altogether. Even if they were still in Labyrinth City, it had a population in the hundreds of thousands. Karan knew little of the world, and it was very unlikely she would be able to find Callios.

The realization caused Karan's heart to break, filling her with despair...and a great desire to eat. Labyrinth City was loud and dirty, unlike the dragonian village, and there was a lot Karan could not bring herself to like about it. Despite that, there was one thing she had grown fond of.

"I should get some food..."

She liked how you could eat food from a variety of cultures and races. She had relied on Callios for inn preparations and food until now, so she had never decided on what to eat herself. There were some silver and copper coins in her wallet. Karan wasn't good at math, but she figured it would last her a week and thought she might as well use it to eat whatever she wanted.

There was one problem. She could buy food from street stalls and carts, but she was hesitant to enter a restaurant alone. Karan was surprisingly self-conscious. She was afraid that if she entered a restaurant alone as a dragonian woman and a novice adventurer, she would become a laughingstock. There was also the possibility of someone tricking her when she paid for the meal.

But Karan still wanted to eat. A mouthwatering smell wafted from the restaurant she was standing in front of. The sun hadn't set yet, and customer traffic was slow. If she was going in, now was the time.

Would they take her order, though? She was paying for leaving so much in life to her former party members. From now on, she would have to manage meals and lodging all by herself. Just when her feelings of helplessness threatened to overwhelm her heart once again, someone addressed her from behind.

"Excuse me. Can you let me pass?"

"Hmm? Y-yeah..."

It was a male adventurer with short black hair. He was a middle-aged man with a robust physique. He was alone, but he walked into the restaurant without a care in the world.

"One ginger pork combo, please," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," an employee responded.

He enjoyed a meal on his own without a care for what anyone thought. Karan found him weird, but she also admired him for his boldness. She noticed the people around him begin to whisper excitedly.

“Hey, isn’t that guy...?”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt! He’s that S-rank adventurer, Solo Diner Fifs!”

Solo Diner Fifs was a mighty warrior who wielded a katana, a sword from the southern region, and was skilled with magic. He had traveled across many lands and was very knowledgeable of the world. He also acted alone, ignoring the common belief that adventurers had to form a party.

The Labyrinth City Adventurers Guild normally forbade adventurers from acting solo. Challenging a labyrinth alone was a death wish unless you possessed exceptional strength. The only people who could venture in alone were members of an advanced party—B rank or above—who received the special permission from the guild’s top brass. Receiving that permission was an honor of the highest degree. Fifs was a famous adventurer who had been given that honor, and he was eating alone right in front of her.

The Adventurers Guild managed adventurers in party units, so even solo adventurers needed a party name. He decided to use his nickname Solo Diner as his, so everyone called him Solo Diner Fifs.

“S-so cool!” Karan muttered to herself. Her heart lit up with hope—maybe eating alone wouldn’t make her look like a loser. It also occurred to her that ordering the same food as him would make it difficult for the restaurant to rip her off. Thinking that, she opened the front door and sat boldly at the counter, just like she saw Fifs do through the window.

“Welcome,” the employee said, handing her a menu. Karan had difficulty reading, so she repeated Fifs’s words.

“One ginger pork combo, please.”

The food hit the spot for the exhausted Karan.

From that day on, Karan began to follow Fifs around. She entered the same restaurants as him and ordered the same food.

Skewered mutton. The meat was a little smelly, and the spices were so extraordinarily spicy she felt like each bite was going to set her mouth on fire, but the rustic and energizing flavor satisfied her.

Shrimp and mushrooms simmered in oil. The taste was just as explosive as the skewered mutton, but in a totally different way. The rich oil blended the taste of the sea with the taste of the mountains, and just one shrimp was surprisingly filling. She was helping herself to seconds and thirds of the baguettes that came with the soup in no time.

Beef-and-beet stew. It had a gentle taste despite its bright-red color. Karan figured that, had she been human, every spoonful of this stew would have reminded her of her mother. It had that type of

nostalgic taste.

A deep-fried mackerel sandwich with vinegar sauce. Karan normally didn't like blueback fish. She had eaten river shrimp and freshwater crab before, but she had never seen fish from the ocean until she came to Labyrinth City. The deep-fried mackerel sandwich was so good that it made her forget all about her dislike of blueback fish. The crispy surface, the soft texture on the inside, and the rich taste were captivating.

Every type of food she ate was shockingly good. Even better, no one treated Karan cruelly for her dirty clothing. There was an explanation for that—Fifs was only choosing restaurants that were welcoming to adventurers and outsiders. He was aware that Karan was following him and copying his orders.

Normally, tailing an adventurer was a good way to get yelled at. But Karan looked so happy as she savored the food. Fifs lost all desire to tell her off when he saw that, and he intentionally went to restaurants that wouldn't treat her cruelly. That said, he didn't feel like taking her under his wing and showing her the ropes in Labyrinth City. He wouldn't even form a party, and there was no way he was willing to help someone for free.

Other adventurers were rivals and enemies. Fifs thought it would be a bad idea to teach her you could expect charity from others. Letting her imitate him, however, was no problem at all.

Karan enjoyed the food without noticing his kindness. She followed him when he abruptly entered a secondhand clothing store as well, thinking there might be something worth checking out inside.

"I believe it's time for a new coat! I can't enter a nice restaurant lookin' this filthy!" Fifs said exaggeratedly for all to hear.

Even then, Karan didn't think for a second that he had caught on to her. Just like Fifs wanted, though, she realized she needed to pay attention to her clothes, so she bought a jacket. It was secondhand and a little damaged, but it wasn't dirty. She actually liked the damage because it gave the jacket its own charm, and it didn't look shabby at all when she wore it with her armor.

Fifs had taught Karan the joy of eating alone without speaking a word to her. She was basically his apprentice. Still, that lifestyle couldn't last forever. Fifs was touring the restaurants of Labyrinth City as part of his vacation, and once he finished, he was going to begin exploring labyrinths again.

Karan was also about to run out of money.

Vaguely recalling something she heard while working as an adventurer, Karan decided to go to the Newbies Adventurers Guild. All she remembered was that it was a good place for beginners to form

a party; she had no idea what to do once she got there. She had zero experience finding jobs at a guild or inviting other adventurers to join her. She had left everything to her former comrades, or rather, they had shut her down every time she tried to help, telling her to “leave these chores to us and stay ready for battle.”

Thinking back, they weren't being kind to her. She now realized, to keep her in their party, they prevented her from learning how to work alone as an adventurer. She felt suspicious of everyone in the guild as a result. She was convinced that all the people who approached her with a smile were trying to deceive her. No one felt worthy of her trust unless they acted alone like Fifs.

“Hey, dragonian lady, you wanna join...? Eek?!” a man began in a sugary tone before cowering when she glared at him.

Dragonians were intimidating even under normal circumstances. Experienced dragonian warriors made weaker monsters flee with just a look. Karan had just learned firsthand that there were truly bad people in the world, putting her in a mood that increased her intimidation factor to a level these novice adventurers could not handle.

Karan needed to recruit companions and resume work as an adventurer. She would run out of money otherwise. Fighting was her only talent, meaning there was no other work available to her. She had no choice, but she couldn't get over the fear that everyone who approached her was trying to take advantage of her.

In the end, Karan was unable to accept any invitations, and she couldn't bring herself to approach anyone else, either. The closing time for Newbies arrived, and the adventurers all headed to a neighboring bar. Karan had eaten there once before. The food was terrible, but it was apparently tradition for novice adventurers to eat and drink there after forming a party.

Karan decided to eat there, too. At least it was cheap. Deciding she needed to put aside her gourmet standards, she placed an order.

The food was as bad as expected. She would have been able to put up with it if that was the only problem, but the embarrassment and hatred she felt toward herself robbed her of any ability to enjoy the meal. The merriment of the novice adventurers around her only exacerbated those feelings.

A group of adventurers meeting for the first time were eating and drinking happily at the next table over. They shared a toast to their new friendships and their adventures to come. She was sure their alcohol and barley porridge probably tasted great to them as they shared hopeful words like “I'm looking forward to working with you all” and “I trust you guys.”

No matter how bad the food was, it tasted good if your heart is

filled with hope. Now that Karan thought about it, her admiration for Fifs as she imitated him amplified the taste of the food she ate. She wouldn't be able to enjoy anything with how miserable she felt now.

What was the point of trusting others? They would just let you down. There was no way she could ever trust anyone who used that word. People like Callios. The image of his handsome face and blond hair flashed in the back of her mind, causing her to seethe with anger.

Why did you betray me? I trusted you.

The unhappy thoughts swirling in her heart emerged from her mouth in a spontaneous shout.

““““I'll never trust anyone again!””””

The Birth of the Survivors



“Urgh, ow... God, that’s the most I’ve ever drank...”

Nick sensed it was morning and slowly sat up. He apparently slept on the floor, but he was used to much worse sleeping conditions and didn’t feel any pain from it. The alcohol was giving him a much harder time. He couldn’t hold his alcohol well, and he was well aware of that. He had gotten hangovers after being forced to drink many times, but this was probably the first it had ever been entirely his own fault.

The room was surprisingly tidy. There were no holes in the walls, there was glass set in the windows, and there were even curtains. Nick would normally never sleep in a place of such excellent quality.

“What am I doing here...? And where is this?”

Nick looked around. He saw three people sprawled out just like him. One was a petite female mage who looked as beautiful as a doll. Another was a tall, handsome priest with something of a decadent aura. The last was a female dragonian with an impressive build who reminded him of a beast. They were all sleeping peacefully.

The mage was the only one sleeping properly in a bed. Her spell book was sitting on a desk, and her robe and hat were on a coat rack. This was probably her apartment. Nick figured he and the other two crashed here uninvited the previous night.

...Who the heck *were* they anyway?

“Oh, wait. I remember going to Newbies... Right, I failed to form a party.”

Nick took a deep breath and recalled yesterday’s events one by one.

Last night, Nick had plain barley porridge and lukewarm ale at the bar. He remembered screaming out of hatred for the people who abandoned him and the anger he felt toward himself.

“““““I’ll never trust anyone again!”””””

That was how he truly felt. The adventurers enjoying themselves at the neighboring table jumped and looked at them. Nick probably would have gotten pissed at them given the mood he had been in recently, but he was distracted by something else. The other three at his table had yelled the exact same thing. They all met eyes, and Nick bowed his head nervously.

“S-sorry about that. I’ve been kind of stressed... I didn’t mean to scream like that,” he apologized.

“I—I lost my temper, too... My apologies,” the mage said, also bowing her head.

The dragonian warrior and the priest bowed timidly as well. They all looked embarrassed, which seemed to create a strange affinity between them. As the mood relaxed, the priest asked Nick a question.

“You don’t look like a novice adventurer... What brings you here?”

“Oh, well...” There was no way he could share his lame story. That was what he thought initially anyway, but for some reason, he began to talk. It was probably because their expressions resembled his. Nick sensed a defeated mess of self-doubt, humiliation, frustration, and pity from the three of them. He didn’t know why, but he felt like they would listen to him without laughter or judgment. That was why he answered honestly. “I...was kicked out of my party. I was fired, basically.”

“I see...,” the priest responded.

“The others in my party were stereotypical adventurers, in a bad way. They spent our money like there was no tomorrow. Even after a successful adventure, they’d spend our earnings so fast that, before I knew it, not only would we be out of money, we’d have to borrow from merchants... We could barely even afford to take care of our weapons.”

Nick noticed that the three of them were listening very seriously.

“So I decided I would manage our funds and tell everyone what we could and couldn’t spend our money on. But I probably just annoyed the hell out of them. They suspected me of taking money, too. I swear on my life I never did.”

“...You were falsely accused,” the priest said painfully.

“I always gave my best. I wanted to repay our leader...Argus, for all he’d done for me. I wanted to do everything I could to support the party. But it was all a goddamn waste of time.”

“You wanted to help...” The dragonian nodded, looking on the verge of tears.

“I was even dumped by my girlfriend. My love for her was totally one-sided, though—to her, I was nothing more than a walking wallet. I kind of lost it after that... I ended up getting obsessed with an idol

and spending all my money. I'm flat broke now."

"Getting betrayed by the one you love is really hard...", the mage said knowingly.

"I thought I would recruit some adventurers and form a party, but I couldn't find anyone...then got so pissed off I had to scream. I guess I wouldn't be in this situation if I hadn't wasted so much money going to idol concerts, though..."

The young adventurers at the neighboring table got up and left, looking uncomfortable. Nick realized that their low spirits had infected the whole restaurant.

"Sorry for bringing down the mood... I'm really pathetic, ha-ha," Nick said, laughing off his confession.

""""No, you're not!""""

The other three spoke in unison.

"Th-thanks," Nick responded.

"M-my... My fiancé abandoned me! Then I was expelled from my aristocratic school and disowned by my family!" The mage—Tiana—wept gently.

"Oh, you're a noble...", Nick said.

"I'm not a member of my family anymore, so I can't use their name. I'm just Tiana, an ordinary commoner. No need to humble yourself around me."

While crying, she began to tell them about the horrible experience she went through and how low she'd sunk. A rival noble stole her beloved fiancé from her. She fell victim to a scheme and was forced out of her family. She came to Labyrinth City looking for employment but found an oversaturated job market and got obsessed with gambling.

Nick thought she had it pretty rough, too. Actually, he had to admit to himself that what she went through was even worse than what happened to him. He felt outraged by her story, while also feeling strangely moved at the thought that he never would have gotten to speak to her on equal terms if her life hadn't fallen apart.

"No, you didn't do anything wrong! It's that Lene girl's fault, and your fiancé is the worst of all! Gettin' jealous of your girl just 'cause she's doing her best is goddamn pathetic!" Nick implored.

"That's right!" the dragonian said.

"Exactly. There are certain lines a person should not cross," the priest agreed.

The three of them felt pity and were filled with indignation for what she went through. Their words made Tiana start crying harder.

"That's the first time...anyone's ever said that to me..." She sobbed.

Nick passed her a handkerchief, and she used it to blow her nose

with a loud honking sound. That wasn't how he intended her to use it, but he didn't say anything. There was something he was more interested in.

"...Hey, priest," he said.

"What is it?" the priest answered.

"Did something terrible happen to you, too?"

He smiled self-deprecatingly at Nick's question. "Yes, but... It is not an easy matter to discuss in front of women..."

"Oh, what does that matter at this point?" Tiana said.

"Yeah!" the dragonian chimed in.

The priest glanced at Nick.

"Well, the women have spoken," Nick said.

"Understood... I shall start by introducing myself. My name is Zem, and I was a priest. I was framed by a little girl whom I was friends with at the sanctuary..."

The priest... Or rather, former priest's story was intense. He was abruptly arrested for a crime he didn't commit and pelted with stones by people he trusted—the other three were speechless at the torment he faced.

"I wandered alone for some time, and... How shall I put this? I drowned in lust for women. I am not poor, but frequenting hostess clubs is not an ideal way to live, so I thought it was about time I found a job... Dear me, I am truly pathetic," the priest said with a self-mocking smile. Everyone knew that was just a show of courage.

"Normally I wouldn't be so sympathetic, but... It's not your fault, man," Nick said.

"You went through a really horrible experience, so... Don't be so hard on yourself," Tiana added.

"Yeah, cheer up," the dragonian said.

The other three consoled Zem and cursed the people who framed him. The shadow over his face seemed to lift somewhat.

They then turned to the dragonian warrior. Her expression had been soft when she consoled Zem, but she stiffened when she realized it was her turn. She had probably gone through something just as bad as the rest of them.

"Hey, did you...?" Nick began to say, but he stopped when the dragonian shrieked quietly. She was clearly afraid. He was surprised; that wasn't the behavior he expected from a dragonian, a race that valued bravery in battle. But he could see that she had been hurt.

Tiana put a hand over the dragonian's. "You went through something horrible, too, didn't you? I can tell."

"...Yeah," the dragonian answered. She had tears in her eyes, and her voice was faint.

"Can you tell us about it? And can you give us your name?" Tiana

asked.

“I’m Karan. I...was betrayed. By my party,” she answered.

The dragonian warrior—Karan—began to tell her story hesitantly. She was tricked by an adventurer using the false name Callios and left to die on the bottom floor of a labyrinth. A valuable gem given to her by her parents was stolen while she was unconscious. She indulged herself on gourmet food while imitating Solo Diner Fifs, then came here when she ran out of money.

“I was so stupid. But...but...”

“It’s wrong to deceive another person like that!” Nick yelled, pounding the table so hard it looked like it would break.

In his opinion, this Callios guy was evil. It wasn’t uncommon for people who couldn’t make it as adventurers or had no hope of reaching a higher rank to become fraudsters. Adventurers were essentially freelancers who offered violence as a service, and turning to a life of crime wasn’t much of a transition. But an adventurer’s party strong enough to take on Pot Snake Cave planning a scam like that would go against even a gangster’s moral code. Out of all the people in the three of their stories, Callios made Nick the angriest.

“How could he tell you to trust him?! He has no right to call himself an adventurer!” he shouted.

“Yeah! He’s a horrible person!” Tiana agreed.

“He really is!” Zem said.

“Oooh... I—I hate them!” Karan shouted, and she began to cry like Tiana. She ordered more ale and drained it vigorously.

“All right, guys! Today we drink to the hope that those who wronged us will get struck by a bolt from the sky!” Nick proclaimed.

“Yes, let’s!” Tiana said.

“I could not have said it better myself!” Zem replied.

“Yeah!” Karan shouted.

Nick stood up and raised his cup.

“““““Cheers!””””””

The others followed suit, and they cheerfully clinked their cups together. Strangely enough, the terrible alcohol couldn’t have tasted better.

That was how the four of them came to crash at Tiana’s apartment. The others had been staying in cheap inns, so Tiana’s place was the only choice. Tiana was also dealing with a hangover-induced headache, but she got up and, together with Nick, tried to remember what happened last night.

“I remember now, too. We had to leave when the bar closed, and... Then we bought alcohol and came here,” she recalled.

“That explains that,” Nick said, glancing at the empty bottles and

half-eaten snacks in the corner of the room. It looked like they even started eating preserved foods made for labyrinth exploration, including dried meat and bread, by night's end.

Zem and Karan got up and expressed their apologies.

"I, uh... I am truly sorry. I will take my leave as soon as I clean up," Zem said.

"S-sorry....," Karan apologized.

It was a common occurrence for adventurers to get drunk and crash together like this, but they were both ashamed. Nick guessed they had never done this before.

A heavy silence befell Tiana's apartment. They all had sheepish and gloomy expressions on their faces. Nick was most worried about Karan. She was hugging her knees on the floor and staring blankly at nothing. Just like him on that rainy day.

I-I'm...an idol.

The idol, Agate, approached him in the park when he was at a loss after being betrayed by Claudine. Her impactful words repeated in Nick's head. At the time, he thought she was eccentric and annoying. But now he understood why Agate reached out to him. His despair had probably been as visible as theirs was now. An even worse disaster would likely befall Karan if he didn't do anything here.

Tiana and Zem were in tough situations, too, of course. They both had special skills in the form of magic and the healing arts, respectively. They could utilize them in ordinary jobs other than adventuring, but they had both been unlucky. If they were both struggling to find the money to simply live another day, let alone continue the job search, they would have to spend at least a small period of time earning money as adventurers.

Karan's situation, however, was more serious. When it came to employing warriors, anyone would do if they had enough strength. Even among adventurers, warriors were much easier to replace than mages or priests. There was no reason the role had to be filled by a dragonian.

It would have been a separate story if she had knowledge of the world like Nick. She could have even led a life like Claudine, making money by deceiving men. But given her lack of life skills, being an adventurer was her only option. If she was unable to find a party, she would likely fall to the lowest rungs of society in Labyrinth City. She could be kidnapped by a slave trader—or end up killing a slave trader or any other villain who tried to approach her and become a wanted criminal. Whatever happened, Nick didn't think things would turn out well for her.

"All right, it is about time we make our—"

"No, wait a moment," Nick interrupted Zem.

“Wh-what’s the matter, Nick?” the former priest asked with a startled look.

“Are we really okay with leaving things like this?” Nick asked.

Those words weren’t actually for the three of them. Was it okay for Nick, who was saved by a passing idol at his lowest moment, to let these people go when only misery awaited them? Would he be able to face himself as an idol fanatic and an Agate fan? He was asking that question to himself.

“Huh?”

“Think about it, guys. Are any of us really gonna get our lives together after parting here?”

They all fell silent at Nick’s words. It dawned on them that while they had shared their troubles over dinner, they had done nothing to solve them.

“Hey, Tiana. You don’t have enough money to pay your next month’s rent, right?” Nick asked.

“H-how do you know that?!” Tiana snapped.

“You told us while you were drunk! Karan, Zem, and I are in a similar situation. Don’t tell me you aren’t fraying at the seams, too!” Nick challenged, looking at Zem and Karan.

Frustration was visible on Karan’s face, but she did not object. Zem nodded in agreement.

“Then I’ve got a proposal,” Nick said.

“What do you mean, a proposal...?” Tiana responded suspiciously, but Nick ignored her.

“What do you guys say to forming a party?”

Their eyes lit up with hope at his words...then immediately went dark again. Awkward silence befell Tiana’s apartment.

“I’m grateful for your proposal. I really am, but...” Tiana trailed off.

“I can’t trust others so easily now,” Karan responded.

“I, too, feel...hesitant at the idea of entrusting my back to someone in a fight,” Zem admitted.

Not letting their reluctance deter him, Nick continued. “I get that. But do you really think you can return to Newbies and find a party like normal people? We all tried and failed.”

“S-sure, but—”

“I don’t wanna be betrayed, either, so I can’t help but be suspicious of everyone when I try to form a party there. You guys are the same. We can’t trust anyone, so it’d be most efficient for the four of us to form a party here and now.”

“I know that! That’s why...”

Nick interrupted Tiana before she could say “That’s why I’m hesitating.”

"I know it'll be tough. That's why I think we should set rules that make it possible for us."

"Rules? Like what?" Tiana asked.

"We all have no choice but to make a living as adventurers, but we don't want to be betrayed by our comrades... That means we need to put a system in place to keep us from stabbing each other in the back," Nick explained.

"That's a nice idea, but..."

"There are two things that cause betrayal. Money and priorities."

"That is an oversimplification... But you may be right," Zem said, nodding. Karan and Tiana nodded as well. Nick saw that they weren't going to object, so he continued speaking.

"We can monitor the money together. We'll use paper to write down the party's budget and how to use the money, like merchants do with an account book. We could even rotate the person in charge of holding on to the money."

"I'm bad with that stuff," Karan mumbled, but Nick didn't let it stop him.

"I'll teach you," Nick said.

Karan looked at him with surprise. Since arriving in the city, people had told her what to do and what not to do, but hardly anyone had expressly said they would teach her something. The best she could ever do was watch and imitate.

"Or do you not want to learn?" Nick challenged.

"No, I do," she replied.

"Then let's move on. As for priorities, let's not meddle with each other's private lives."

"...What exactly do you mean by that?" Tiana questioned.

"Hmm, let me think... Once we finish a labyrinth expedition and share the reward, we split it. We'll all do whatever we want for food, beer, you name it. We won't criticize each other's hobbies."

"Ah..." It looked like the appeal of his words dawned on her. Tiana was a gambler to the core. Most people would admonish her if she revealed that, but she would never quit just because she was told to. Allowing her to continue gambling would be an unconditional term for her.

"Why do adventurers like to go out drinking so much anyway? It makes people who don't like to drink feel inferior, and those who get drunk off their ass get praised to high heaven. It's goddamn nonsense. You should be judged by your performance at work and nothing else," Nick ranted.

"It sounds like you are speaking from experience, Nick," Zem said.

"Y-yeah, I guess...", Nick deflected, embarrassed. Tiana acted like she didn't care, but she clearly wanted to hear more of Nick's

proposal.

"Well... I like the sound of not criticizing each other's hobbies," she said.

"Right? I don't need anyone commenting on my hobbies, either. And I don't give a shit about the idea that parties should be a family... I'll never trust anyone again just 'cause they're a party member, and I don't want your trust, either. I *want* you to think I might betray you—or that the others might betray you. Also, I don't think leaving things to others without saying anything shows trust. I think trust should involve open, consistent channels of communication," Nick complained all in one breath.

Tiana was the next to speak after a short silence. "I know what you mean."

"Then...," Nick began.

"However," Tiana said emphatically. "You said we can keep track of our finances on paper, but the actual money is what matters. Taking turns holding on to it will just mean more chances for someone to steal it. Performing strict checks will only prevent mistakes, not ill intent."

"You have a point," Nick admitted.

"Of course I do," she responded with annoyance, looking at him coldly.

Nick changed his mind without taking offense. "Then... Karan can hold on to the money."

"Huh?" Karan said, surprised to hear her name. She seemed to be having trouble keeping up.

"We'll prepare a safe with a key. A sturdy safe that can't be destroyed with magic or a hammer. You're going to keep it," Nick declared.

"Huh?!"

"You'll hold on to the key, Zem. I'll manage the ledger, and Tiana will check to see that the numbers and money match. How does that sound?"

The other three looked baffled by Nick's proposal.

Karan looked the most uneasy—she was on the verge of tears. "My most important possession was s-stolen," she said.

"So you said," Nick replied.

"Then why me?!"

"That's exactly why. Make sure it doesn't happen again. Don't let us steal from the safe. You know how it feels to have something valuable stolen from you, so you should be up to the task."

Karan listened to him with a vacant expression.

"You're going to learn to read and write in a ledger, too. You'll need it in the future, whether working as an adventurer or doing any

other job.”

“...Okay.” Karan nodded meekly.

“By the way, are you giving me the key because I was imprisoned? I must say I do not dislike the irony,” Zem said with a smirk.

“Whoa, I didn’t mean to...,” Nick began to say, then started over. “Actually, I did mean it that way. You’re the best one to have the key.”

Zem smiled happily after hearing Nick say it honestly.

“What do you think, Tiana?” Nick asked.

“You’re asking the one who fell victim to a plot by her fiancé and the girl he cheated with to monitor the money. Is that a challenge to prove I’m not completely blind? I think that’s an *incredible* idea!” she exclaimed sarcastically.

“I didn’t think about all that!” Nick protested.

Tiana spun away, pouting. “You’re too trusting,” she muttered.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing.”

Nick pretended not to, but he knew what Tiana was trying to say. He would be the one with the fewest chances to touch the safe. It would be most difficult for him to steal from it if he was ever short on money and felt tempted. He might have been in charge of the ledger, but he saddled himself with the position of having to entrust the actual money to the others.

“Anyway... I think this is a good plan. Only if we can pull it off,” Tiana said.

“It’s your job as the monitor to make sure we do,” Nick retorted.

“I know that!” she snapped back.

“You can do it,” Karan said, chuckling.

“So uh... Now that we’ve got that figured out...,” Nick said, scratching his head shyly. What he had to say next was about as difficult as a confession of love. But he had no choice. He had to give to them what he received when the idol gave him that concert ticket. “...Want to form a party?”

The four of them headed to the Newbies Adventurers Guild.

“Whaa...? P-please wait a moment...”

At reception, Nick applied for the formation of a new party with the intense eyes of someone who was avenging a murdered family member. He wasn’t angry about anything in particular—he was just afraid that if they didn’t maintain the momentum from their previous conversation, the four of them would wimp out on this plan. That sense of danger caused them to rush to the guild like their lives depended on it.

Unfortunately, they ended up scaring the lady at reception, and she rushed to the back of the room looking like she was going to cry.

“...Um, Nick,” Zem said.

“What’s up, Zem?” Nick replied.

“I do not believe we needed to scare her...”

“...You’re right.” Nick agreed, but Tiana took offense.

“But aren’t you glad we didn’t run away like her?! We didn’t do anything wrong!” she yelled.

“Hey, relax. This’ll be over once we finish the paperwork, so just be patient,” Nick said, calming her down as she clenched her fists and started to stand up from her seat. Tiana muttered her complaints, but she complied.

The group waited at reception without another word until a scary-looking old woman emerged from behind.

“Get in here,” she said, jerking her chin for the group to enter a conference room.

Nick helped himself to a seat on the sofa in the conference room. The others followed his example.

“What were you thinking, scaring the receptionist like that?” the old woman asked with an exasperated sigh, sitting opposite the group.

“We just want to form a party,” Nick responded.

“Then don’t look at her like you want to kill her. It’d be one thing if you were just dolts trying to be intimidating, but I don’t think that’s the case with you. There’s something frightening about your eyes.”

“You’re one to talk. It’s...Vilma, right?”

The old woman sitting before them worked as a manager at the Newbies Adventurers Guild, and its bouncer. She used to be an advanced adventurer who fought as a warrior, and she was recruited by this guild when she retired due to her age. She was still strong enough to easily overpower the novice adventurers at this guild, and anyone who started a fight within the building got a taste of her fist. It was such a common sight it felt as inevitable as leaves turning red in the fall.

“You’re Nick, right? Formerly part of Combat Masters,” Vilma said, bringing up his old haunt right away. His eyebrows twitched.

“...Guess that means we can skip the introductions,” Nick responded.

“So your team will be a light warrior, a dragonian warrior, a mage, and a cleric. You’re well-balanced, I suppose,” Vilma said, reading the jobs they each wrote down.

Jobs registered at the guild were self-professed, but as long as reality wasn’t too far from what you put down, no one said anything. Nick thought it would be annoying to explain that he fought using martial arts and a dagger and was also skilled at scouting and

bookkeeping, so he just called himself a light warrior.

“Regardless, I’ll be glad to see the Survivor return to active duty,” Vilma added.

“Survivor? Is that someone’s nickname?” Nick asked, looking at each of his companions. They all shook their heads; they didn’t seem to know what she was talking about, either.

“What, you haven’t heard? I’m talking about you, dragonian girl. It’s Karan, right?” Vilma asked.

“Me?” Karan responded.

“A rumor has spread among guild members that you were deceived and left to die in Pot Snake Cave, but you managed to survive and return. Escaping from a C-rank labyrinth alone is no easy task. That’s why people are calling you the Survivor,” the old woman explained.

“...What was that?” Karan frowned, glaring at Vilma with a fire in her eyes. Vilma was a veteran adventurer and a member of the guild’s staff; a dragonian wouldn’t intimidate her.

“It sounds like that was a hard experience. But adventurers are judged less on their simple strength and more on their ability to survive and return. It’s probably not a pleasant memory for you, but the story has earned you respect,” Vilma said.

Karan’s eyes wavered at the woman’s words. She looked taken aback—and unsure of whether she should be angry, disappointed, or glad. Sensing her internal struggle, Nick rounded on Vilma.

“She’s earned respect, huh... Hah. Well, that’s just damn peachy,” he sneered in a loud voice, clasping his hands behind his head. Vilma glared at Nick, but he didn’t back down. “Do you really think complimenting her for surviving is gonna make her feel grateful? She was betrayed and almost died. If you have time for rumors, how about spending it catching assholes who work as adventurers under false names. People are getting away with breaking the guild’s rules and stealing things.”

“Is that how you speak to a superior?” Vilma responded.

“I don’t give a damn who I’m speaking to. Is it your job to gossip about people’s private affairs or register parties like us?”

The mood had suddenly turned sour. Nick noticed that Tiana and Zem were glowering at Vilma with him. It was Karan—the one they were defending—who broke the silence.

“That’s enough, Nick,” she said.

“But—”

“I think I like Survivor. I’m tough.” Karan grinned, and Nick relaxed.

“...Yeah, you are,” he replied.

Seeing that, Vilma calmed down as well and apologized. “Sorry

about that... You're right that the guild's negligence has allowed people who prey on adventurers to get away with whatever they want. We are searching for the man who called himself Callios. We haven't found his trail yet, but we have an idea of his face and physique. We'll find him."

"Good to hear. You'd better give it your all," Nick insisted.

The knowledge that she was deceived probably weighed heavier in Karan's mind than the anger of having her possessions stolen. That was why she was smiling and putting on a brave front. It was a bad idea for a Newbies adventurer to pick a fight with Vilma, but as one of Karan's new companions, he needed to defend her. He breathed an internal sigh of relief that the old woman didn't take offense to his outburst.

"Naturally. That'll require the young lady to give us the full story later, though... Getting back on topic, what'll your party name be?" Vilma asked.

Nick was completely caught off guard. "...Crap, I didn't think about that."

"You've got to be joking," Vilma said, shrugging, but Karan spoke up.

"What about Survivor?" she suggested.

"Huh? I don't know about that...", Nick said hesitantly, but Karan smiled.

"I like it. It's important to be tough."

"Hmm... What do you guys think?" Nick asked, tossing the question to the other two.

"If Karan likes it, I don't mind," Tiana said.

"Yes, it is not a bad name. I believe it describes the four of us adequately," Zem stated.

"Yeah, we've all been through a lot... Then why don't we call ourselves the Survivors?"

The other three nodded at Nick's proposal.

"Then we can expect you to survive and return from any adventure," Vilma said.

Nick responded with a gloating smile. "Heh, of course."

That day, the Survivors embarked on a new adventure, ready to persevere through any hardship.

The Survivors' First Failure



Parties full of novice adventurers occupied the tables in the Newbies Adventurers Guild's reception room, chatting and holding meetings despite the early hour. They were all excited at the prospect of a new adventure, giving the room a cheery atmosphere you wouldn't expect from people who worked as adventurers for a living.

There were also new adventurers studying the bulletin board with great interest, looking at the hunting quests for named monsters and collection requests for medicinal herbs and minerals, among other jobs. Despite their excitement, the jobs posted in the Newbies Adventurers Guild weren't particularly profitable. There were multiple branches of the Adventurers Guild in Labyrinth City, and much more money could be made at branches intended for intermediate adventurers or branches that specialized in jobs from merchants rather than labyrinth exploration. This guild was nothing more than a place for beginners to find their legs before leaving the nest.

"That's why we need to explore labyrinths and gain experience," Nick said.

"Yeah," Tiana responded.

"Okay," Karan said.

"Naturally," Zem agreed.

The Survivors were sitting at a table in the reception room and holding a meeting like the rest of the adventurers. The other three were listening closely to Nick.

"Do you know why monsters in labyrinths need to be killed in the first place?" Nick posed.

"Huh?" Tiana said, looking surprised.

"Hmm? Did I say something weird?"

"That's just a difficult question to start with. I thought you would start with practical knowledge like what adventurers do and how they earn money." Tiana watched him cheerfully.

"Sounds like you already know the answer," Nick said.

“Of course. Adventurers explore labyrinths to cleanse them of miasma,” Tiana answered.

“Bingo. The term *labyrinth* refers to a place with a high concentration of miasma. That miasma naturally spawns monsters, and it turns plants and animals into monsters as well. I’ve even heard that if a person stays in a labyrinth for one or two months, their heart’ll get taken over by monsters.”

“Huh...,” Karan said, looking like that was new information to her.

“Monsters are basically a mass of miasma. Each one you kill decreases the labyrinth’s miasma slightly. But if you leave the labyrinth alone, on the other hand...”

“That allows it to expand. The miasma builds up, and monsters that can emerge from the labyrinth begin to appear,” Tiana said, finishing Nick’s sentence.

“Exactly,” Nick responded with a nod.

“What compels monsters to attack people?” Zem asked casually.

“Beats me,” Nick answered.

“I don’t know,” Tiana said.

“Neither one of you knows?” Karan asked innocently. Nick looked to Tiana, unable to bring himself to tell her he didn’t have a clue. Tiana shrugged and began to explain.

“...That’s been a mystery for a long time. All monsters attack people, whether they’re types with intelligence like devils or ghosts—or types that resemble insects or small animals and can’t speak. Attempts at conversation always fail. That leaves no choice but to fight them... That’s the accepted opinion.”

“You’re saying some people try to *talk* to monsters?” Nick said incredulously.

“Occasionally. There are a lot of eccentrics at mage workshops and research facilities... But we’ve gotten off topic. That was my lecture! Class dismissed!” Tiana proclaimed, clapping her hands with displeasure.

Nick continued with a strained smile. “We can’t split up yet. Let’s cut the complicated stuff there and move on to more practical matters, like what exactly we do as adventurers and how we make money.” The other three sat up straight and listened. “I’m sure you figured this out from what we just talked about, but we explore labyrinths.”

“That much is clear,” Zem said.

“Yep. That said, we can’t go in blind. We need a plan first. We’re starting at G rank... That’s the lowest rank for an adventurer’s party. We’re newly formed and have a couple people with no experience, so there was no avoiding that. The first thing we need to do is conquer labyrinths designated for beginners and rise up to F rank,” Nick

explained.

“Does something good happen if we raise our rank?” Tiana asked.

“Not really... It’s more that it just sucks to be G rank. There are only three labyrinths we’re currently allowed to enter. We’ll be able to explore more if we up our rank. There are some higher-ranking labyrinths we’ll be able to handle easily with our party.”

“So we need to raise our rank. How do we do that?”

“We take on two of the three labyrinths G-rank adventurers can enter and defeat their bosses. That’s it.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“It’s really not that hard. It’s meant as practice for people who don’t have experience fighting monsters.”

Nick produced a map from his pocket. It was a rough map with Labyrinth City at the center and the names of dangerous-sounding places surrounding it. It was a beginner’s map that showed the locations of labyrinths.

“The three labyrinths are Goblin Forest, which has goblin nests, Goopy Waterworks, which is overrun with slimes, and Shadow Wolf Cave, which has shadow wolf dens. All three are less than half a day’s journey from the city. If all goes well, we can finish a labyrinth in less than a day. Although...” Nick trailed off suggestively.

“Although what?” Tiana questioned.

“Tiana, Zem. Do you have any experience exploring labyrinths and fighting monsters?”

Tiana and Zem both frowned.

“I’ve killed goblins during magic training, but this’ll be my first time in a labyrinth,” Tiana answered.

“I, too, lack experience. The most I have done is help with monster exterminations on highways,” Zem responded.

“Don’t worry. A G-rank party is always going to have beginners. That’s why they limit the labyrinths we can enter. You’ve got experience, right, Karan?” Nick turned to look at her.

“Yes, but...” Karan hesitated.

“Go on.”

“I don’t really remember those three. I only went to them once. We mostly went to intermediate labyrinths.”

“Ah...”

People who had combat experience before becoming an adventurer didn’t bother too much with beginner labyrinths. That was especially true when capable fighters joined established parties. They would never waste their time in a labyrinth with little opportunity for profit.

“I want us to take our time and explore these labyrinths instead of just killing the boss and leaving. What do you think of that, Karan?”

Nick asked.

“Why would we need to do that? I think it would be fine to reach F rank quickly and go to different labyrinths...,” she replied.

Nick held up his index finger. “The first reason is for training. Each of these three labyrinths has something that sets them apart. Goblin Forest, as its name suggests, has a lot of goblins. They’re weak individually, but they always act in a pack. The slimes in Gooley Waterworks are even weaker, but they’re a pain if you don’t know much about them. The monsters in Shadow Wolf Cave are good at hiding, so you need to prepare for that.”

“So they’ve all got some kind of obstacle to overcome,” Tiana said, and Nick gave a small nod.

“Yeah. I want to see if you can handle a variety of labyrinths. I’ve got one more reason. There’s a very important skill you need for labyrinth exploration.”

“What’s that?”

“You need to know how to exchange the monsters you defeat for money.”

The other three nodded knowingly at Nick’s words. The members of the Survivors all shared a problem—they needed to earn money as quickly as possible to pay for living expenses such as lodging charges.

“Every monster has a body part that stores mana. A slime’s core is one example, or a wolf’s fangs. Goblins don’t have much mana, but they become a problem if their numbers increase, so the guild’ll pay you for submitting the severed ears of the ones you killed,” Nick explained.

“That sounds disgusting, but we don’t have a choice, huh...?”

“My experience collecting medicinal herbs does not sound like it will be particularly helpful...”

Tiana and Zem both looked queasy at the prospect of cutting off goblin ears.

“Do your best to get used to it. There are some tricks that make collecting from monsters easier, though they’re kinda boring. If you take collection lightly, you won’t make much money in any labyrinth. Right, Karan?”

“S-sorry, I...never collected monster parts,” Karan confessed.

“All right, then you can learn with them. Sound good?”

“Yeah.”

“The monsters in the labyrinths G-rank adventurers can enter are weak, but there are a lot of them. We’ll make a good amount of money if we stay and hunt for a while. Let’s build a good foundation before we aim to increase our rank,” Nick advised.

“Yeah, I need to save up for rent first...,” Tiana mumbled, gripping her staff.

“Your apartment’s in a nice location, too. I’ll bet the rent’s expensive,” Nick said.

“It’s actually not. I’m just a...little short on money...”

Nick refrained from saying that was because she blew it all gambling—though his reason for running out of money wasn’t any better. “All right, then! Let’s go venture into our first labyrinth!”

And the other three braced themselves for their first day on the job.

The Survivors went to Goopy Waterworks first. The labyrinth was a water supply facility from an ancient civilization. It was in ruins and had lost its original purpose entirely, but the building itself had somehow remained standing. The five-story brick building was overrun with slimes lying in wait for adventurers.

This labyrinth was very close to the city—less than an hour’s walk away. It was also significantly less dangerous and the easiest among the three G-rank ones.

“...Hey, Nick,” Tiana said.

“What’s up?” he responded.

“Are we going to kill that one?”

Tiana pointed at a slime near the Goopy Waterworks entrance. It was about the size of a dog and didn’t seem cautious of the four of them in the least as it fed on grass. It was a monster, but its undeveloped sensory organs meant it wouldn’t notice people until it was attacked.

“It’s kinda cute-looking, but...,” Nick began.

“But what?” Tiana asked.

“It’ll eat anything, from wheat to vegetables to medicinal herbs. Labyrinth City is protected ’cause it’s surrounded by walls, but slimes cause problems if they reach agricultural communities. They’ll even eat sheep or goats if they get big enough. These guys are real gluttons.”

“Th-that is terrifying...,” Zem said, his face growing tight.

“That said, killing them is easy. Magic’s the easiest way, but you can even do it empty-handed.” Nick put on a pair of leather gloves and plunged a hand into the slime’s body. “Got it.” He pulled his hand back out five seconds later, holding what looked like an unpolished blue gemstone. “You can kill the small ones with your hands just like that. This is what happens once you take out the core.”

Unable to maintain its shape without its core, the slime turned to mucus and was absorbed by the ground.

“Wow, it’s that easy?” Tiana said, sounding relieved.

“Only here. The ones on the upper floors can hurt you if you’re careless. A slime isn’t gonna kill you, though,” Nick answered.

"I'll be fine. I've killed orcs and goblins before," the mage boasted confidently. Karan and Zem appeared less tense as well.

"Me too. I have been to labyrinths with stronger enemies," Karan said.

"I lack that level of experience, but I have killed monsters that wandered onto the road during my travels," Zem added.

"I know you have experience. That's good. But... What exactly can you do? How did you kill the monsters?" Nick asked.

"Can't you tell? I fight with magic."

"I use this sword."

"I have a mace."

They each showed their weapons, each looking as if they thought he had asked a dumb question.

"...All right, let's go. You guys ready?" Nick asked, and the three of them signaled they were.

"We shouldn't waste time standing around here," Tiana responded, clenching her fists tightly.

Her demeanor gave Nick reservations, but he didn't say anything. He did, however, realize that the party was still lacking in one important area.

Just like at the entrance, killing the slimes on the first floor was closer to menial work than it was to combat. All they had to do was stick their hands in and take their cores. The slimes got a little quicker on the second floor, making it more difficult to grab them, but that wasn't a big problem, either. On the third floor, the slimes began to behave at least a little like monsters. They sensed the party's approach and fired mucus at them.

"Be careful, guys," Nick warned.

"That hardly seems necessary..." Tiana muttered.

The slimes looked more like they were playing than attacking.

"You could get a face full of mucus, or you could slip and fall."

"Bleck!"

A nasty blob hit Tiana in the face as soon as she let her guard down.

"Uh... Are you okay?"

Tiana ignored the concern in his voice and used a hand to wipe away the muck. It wasn't sticky, so it came off easily. Her face was a little red—she wasn't hurt, but it looked like she had been slapped.

"I see how it is. That's the last time I mistake these guys for cute little mascots," she said threateningly, readying her staff.

"No, you idiot!" Nick shouted,

"Icicle... Huh?!"

Just as Tiana began her incantation, Karan rushed in front,

sidestepping the blob attacks and reaching out for the slime's core. Tiana's half-complete spell shot forward.

"Gyah?!" Karan used her giant sword as a shield and deflected the oncoming ice shard. It wasn't very strong, but it would have scratched her had it made contact.

"..."

"Wh-what are you looking at me like that for?" Tiana snapped defensively. Karan looked at her with visible fear and anger as if afraid she would attack her again. "...It was my fault, too, for firing that without warning. But you need to be careful of your surroundings."

"I'm not mad," Karan responded.

"You sure look mad to me."

"Mistakes happen. I should've been paying attention. But..."

"Go on."

"Don't complain next time I mess up."

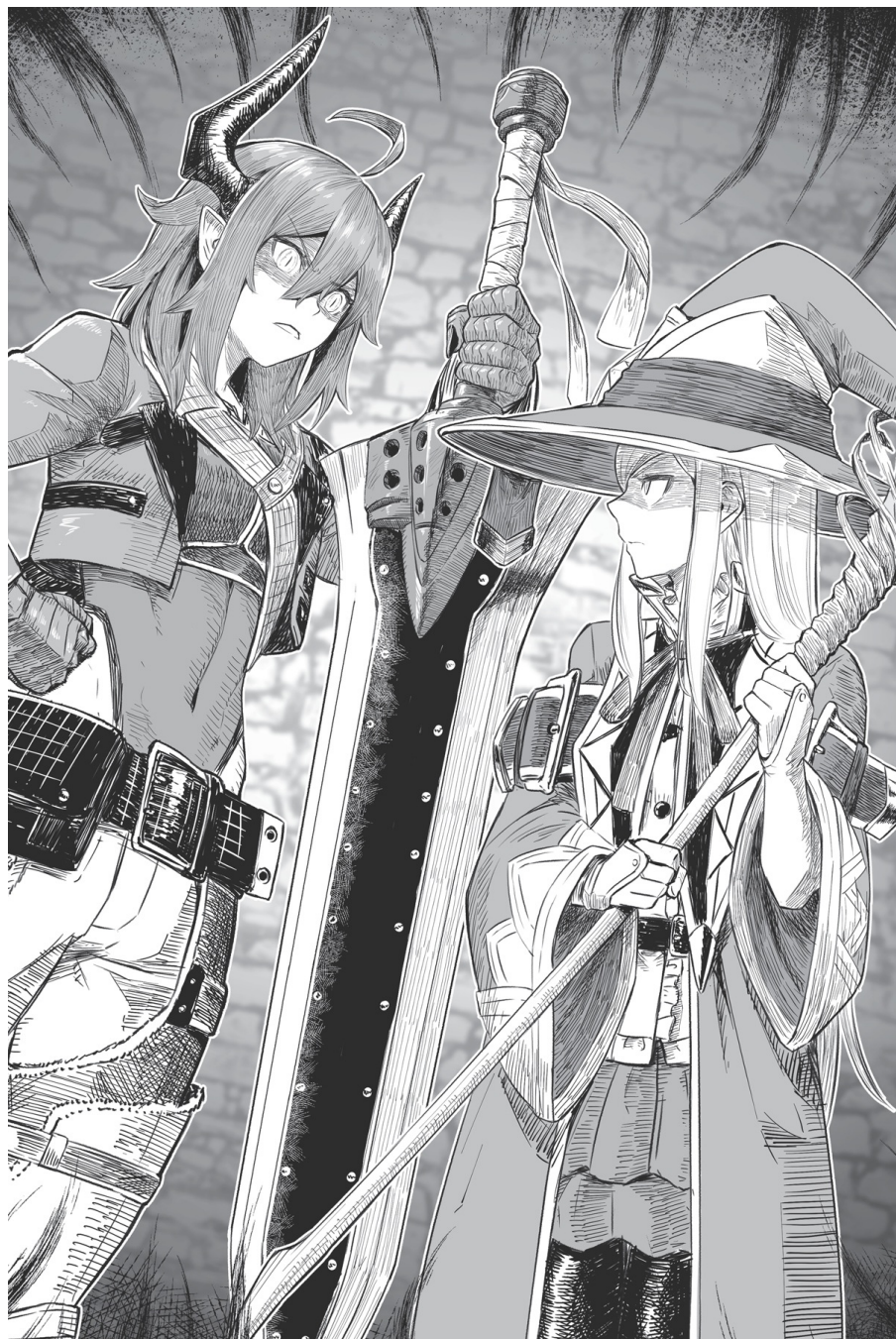
Tiana glared at the dragonian; a fight seemed imminent.

"Um... Nick?" Zem glanced at Nick with an expression that said "Please do something."

"All right, let's get moving," Nick shouted, ignoring the tension between the two girls.

"U-um..."

"Karan! Tiana!"



They both followed reluctantly.

The party made it to the fourth floor.

"...There are red ones here," Zem observed.

"Don't reach your hand into these guys. The red slimes can use a spell called Ignite, so you'll get burned. They can't do anything else, though."

"Noted. I will go on ahead."

"Oh, Zem..."

Zem probably decided he couldn't trust Karan and Tiana, given their cold attitudes. He gripped his mace and walked forward.

"Hi-yah!"

He smashed the slimes one by one, killing each with one blow.

"Zem, hold on. We won't make any money that way," Nick said.

"Ah," the priest responded, stopping immediately. His blows were destroying the cores, too.

"You need to hit them a little less hard. Or chip away at them while avoiding their core. That'll weaken the slimes and make them unable to use magic."

Zem nodded to show his understanding and resumed his work. After he killed about ten slimes, one with a different color appeared. It was a beautiful, glossy white.

"Should I avoid the core with this one, too?" Zem asked.

"Wait, that one's dangerous!" Nick yelled.

"Huh?"

The slime's shape seemed to blur right when Nick said that. Before he knew it, the creature had jumped for a solid hit on Zem's stomach, leaving only an afterimage where they found it.

"Gah!"

"Wh-what is that thing?" Karan asked, instinctively supporting Zem as he staggered. The white slime jumped again and began to bounce about the narrow hallway.

"Sorry, I shoulda told you about these guys sooner. White slimes are kinda rare. They're stupid fast, so it hurts if they hit you. All they do is jump, though, which makes it easy to predict their movement... Take that!"

Nick took aim and kicked the slime down as it jumped toward him. It plopped to the ground, and he used that chance to rip out its core.

"You okay, Zem?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe so... The injury does not require healing magic." Zem sighed, looking tired.

"The top floor is next. The boss is there. We'll be done with this labyrinth once we kill it," Nick said.

“What kind of slime is the boss? There’s no way you don’t know,” Tiana asked with an accusatory look.

Nick was unbothered by her anger. “It’s a giga slime. It’s bigger than a cow. Let’s see... Be careful of its size and the mucus it shoots. It can also swallow and suffocate a smaller person. That’s about it.”

“Do you kill it the same way?”

“Yep. You weaken its exterior first, then rip out the core. The core’s a bit bigger than a human fist, which actually makes it easier to grab.”

“...Is that really it?”

“Why are you doubting me so much?”

“You were the one who told us not to trust each other.”

“Good point... I’m not lying, though. It’s not that fast, and it doesn’t use magic. It doesn’t set weaker monsters on you, either. The only two things you have to worry about are its mucus and its size.”

“...Got it.” Tiana nodded and then stomped up the staircase on her own.

Unlike the first four floors, which were all made up of complex hallways, the top floor was a wide, open room with a giant slime sitting imposingly in the center.

“All we have to do is kill that, right?”

Tiana took one step forward. The others watched her attentively.

“Hey, Tiana,” Nick said.

“What is it now?” Tiana groaned.

“I...just got a question.”

“Then spit it out.”

“...We can trust your magic, right?”

“Don’t worry. I would’ve easily killed that slime earlier if my spell had hit it. I’ll kill this boss in one hit.”

“You’re sure you can do it?”

“Just watch me.”

Tiana grinned confidently and raised her staff overhead.

The Survivors were a disgusting mess after killing the boss and conquering Goopy Waterworks.

“Oh my god! What is this stuff?!” Tiana screamed.

They were drenched—not with water but with a thick, viscous liquid.

“Urgh, this is gross...,” Karan said dejectedly, using a cloth to wipe off the slime in her hair and on her horns.

“Well, at least we sustained no injuries... Are you okay, Nick?” Zem asked.

“I’m fine. This slime isn’t poisonous, and it’ll wash off with water. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Nick started a fire by the riverside, then set up a simple clothesline next to it. After rinsing off his jacket and armor, he hung them up to dry.

"I don't care if it's not poisonous; it's still disgusting! Ugh, I hate my life!" Tiana screamed again.

The liquid they were covered in was the body of the giga slime. Tiana's ice spell was effective, but overly so. The giga slime's body had exploded, causing the viscous fluid to burst in all directions and drench the party.

"...Nick."

"What?"

"You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

"I had an idea. Your magic was a little stronger than I expected, though."

"Then you should've said something!"

Nick returned Tiana's glare without flinching. "Why didn't you fill us in on your plan beforehand? I could've given you advice."

"Uh, well..." Tiana fell silent.

"Also, Zem." Nick turned to him.

"Yes?"

"There's no need for the priest to fight up front."

"That may be so, but I felt guilty remaining in the back..."

"No, that's what the rear guard is supposed to do. It's your job to stay back and protect us. Unless..." Nick glanced at Tiana and Karan. "Did you do it 'cause you thought it would be faster to take out the slimes yourself?"

"...Yes."

Zem had done all the actual fighting on the fourth floor, while Tiana and Karan awkwardly supported him.

"So you're blaming us for that?" Tiana snapped angrily.

"...Hmph." Karan snorted loudly. That just made Tiana even angrier.

"What, do you have something to say? You didn't do anything past the third floor," the mage pointed out.

"Because you shot a spell at me!" Karan fired back.

"I made a mistake, okay?!"

"...You don't get it." Karan had an uncharacteristically dark expression. "If we have to worry about being hit by our own party members...we'll die."

"Oh..."

"I know I messed up. I was careless... I know that, but I have to think of the worst possibility. I can't trust you all right away."

Karan gave words to what everyone felt. They had all been betrayed. That betrayal had ruined their lives and placed them in

mortal danger. Forgetting that and entrusting their back in a fight to someone they just met was an impossibility. It was inevitable their minds would go to the worst possible scenario. Tiana, Zem, and Nick had a deep understanding of Karan's need to be wary.

"...I may not be cut out to be an adventurer. Thanks for the offer anyway," Tiana said to Nick, smiling. The smile exuded resignation and forgiveness.

"I got something to say," Nick announced. He figured things would turn out this way. The vast majority of adventurers were rootless vagabonds; fights and quarrels were everyday occurrences. Throw in the trust issues of this party, and there was no way things were going to go smoothly.

"What now?" Tiana asked.

"I realized I haven't told you much about myself. Care to listen?"

"You told us about yourself before."

"No, I didn't. I told you about what I went through, but I haven't told you much about my skill set as an adventurer."

"Your skill set?" Tiana repeated.

"I fight using martial arts and a dagger, and I'm also a scout. That's about all I'm useful for as far as labyrinths go. I'm also a good judge of tools, and I can keep an account book," Nick explained, using his fingers to count off his skills. "I have no magical talent whatsoever. I'm bad at using heavyweight weapons. I'm competent with a shortbow and throwing items—but not as good as specialists. That's about it."

The other three listened as Nick spoke. Guilty expressions appeared on their faces when they realized why he was telling them this.

"The reason you have to be cautious of others is 'cause you don't know what they can do to you. But I just explained my strengths and weaknesses. If we have a better idea of each other's capabilities, things should go differently."

They had only given each other a rough description of their jobs and abilities. Nick casually probed each of them about their capabilities before they embarked on the adventure, but they evaded his questions. They entered the labyrinth without a clear designation of roles as a result.

"I know what you're trying to say, but...", Tiana said, remaining evasive.

They all realized they needed to have this discussion eventually if they were going to work as a party, but disclosing their skills was the same as revealing their weaknesses. They were also afraid that their talents could give birth to unnecessary jealousy. It was partially because of their abilities that Zem, Tiana, and Karan had had their

lives ruined, and it was also the reason they were hanging on by a thread—that and certain items they had kept a secret. They were able to share their embarrassing bad habits, but their experiences had ingrained in them that revealing their greatest skills was dangerous.

“I did say we wouldn’t interfere with each other’s private lives. But the skills we use at work are hardly part of our private lives, right? I won’t force any of you to talk about it, but we’re going to have a lot more trouble if we don’t know what we all can do.”

Nick refrained from saying that the experience they just had should have made that clear. Their faces said they already got the message.

“Urgh... Y-you’re right...,” Tiana admitted.

“We can handle Gooley Waterworks just fine as we are now ’cause it’s not that dangerous, but we’d struggle in other labyrinths. Slime cores are cheap, too, so a full day’s work here isn’t gonna get us much more than a child’s allowance,” Nick continued.

“We live in a cruel world,” Zem said sadly.

“So now you know my capabilities. If you still think I’m hiding somethin’...” Nick placed the dried jacket and armor as well as the dagger at his hip before the other three. “You can take my armor, clothes, or weapon as collateral. You can sell ’em if it turns out I’m lying. If that’s not enough for you, I can strip butt naked right now.”

“That won’t be necessary! Please put on your jacket! How long are you going to stand there half naked?!” Tiana yelled, red-faced.

“Ah, sorry,” Nick apologized, embarrassed, and put his jacket back on.

“Anyway... I’m surprised adventurers know how to keep a detailed ledger.”

“No, most can’t. They usually leave taxes and other paperwork to scribes.”

“Huh?”

Nick muttered shyly before Tiana could ask him why he learned how to do it himself. “...I was worried I would be overcharged if I didn’t check the numbers myself.”

Surprise showed on Tiana’s face, and then she grabbed her belly and burst out laughing. “Ah-ha-ha, you really do have trust issues.”

“Shut up. You already knew that.”

“True, true.”

Tiana walked over to the river. She scooped up some water to wash her face, then resolved herself and returned to the campfire.

“Karan. And you two as well.”

“How come you say Karan’s name but not ours?”

“Sorry about earlier. That was my mistake,” Tiana apologized sincerely, standing before Karan.

Nick and Zem both looked at her in disbelief. She may have been banished, but they thought her noble upbringing would have made her too proud to apologize in such a manner. Karan stared off into the distance looking uninterested, but Tiana continued speaking.

"I'm a mage... Though, you already know that. My best elements are wind and water. I'm good at lightning magic, too, which is a compound of wind and water. I can use earth elemental magic, too, but I'm bad at it. I can hardly use fire at all."

"Man, you're really skilled," Nick responded, amazed.

"Really?"

"There aren't many who can use compound elements."

"Thanks. I can also use a few support spells. There are a lot of different types, so we should test to see which are helpful... Oh, I have no self-defense skills like Nick's martial arts or capability with the dagger, and I don't want to carry anything other than my staff, no matter how small. I need your protection when fighting monsters."

"...You didn't have to say that much. Why are you telling me this?" Karan asked.

"You don't get it?" Tiana replied with a question of her own.

"No."

"If someone used fire or earth element spells on me or attacked me at close range, I wouldn't stand a chance. There *are* spells that can be used in close quarters, but...they're not nearly as fast as striking or slashing at someone."

"...?!"

Karan was taken aback by how confidently Tiana shared her own weaknesses.

"I shall go next," Zem volunteered after clearing his throat. "I am proficient at healing and support magic. I am also knowledgeable about medicine. Of all my support magic, I believe my battalion magic may prove the most useful."

"What's battalion magic?" Nick asked.

It was Tiana who answered. "It's support magic for use on large groups of people. Examples include a spell that prevents legs from getting tired, a spell that makes people relax and increases the effects of rest, and a spell that simulates excitement and removes fear."

"That sounds handy."

"It's super convenient for long-distance travel. Can you use it on our journeys?" Tiana inquired.

"Yes, of course," Zem responded with a nod. "I also have experience exterminating monsters with a mace, but I am not especially skilled with it. I would rather not injure my hands, given that I treat many patients with non-magical methods."

Zem showed them his hands. There were no cuts or calluses, but

they were dry and chapped. He clearly needed to wash them frequently.

"Killing me would be quite simple. I would struggle to defend myself against blades, fists, or offensive magic. I am sure that is true for most people, however. Ah, if you do try to kill me, I recommend you make it quick. I can heal wounds with my magic. I am tougher than I look."

"Don't make it sound like you expect one of us to kill you. That hurts to hear," Nick complained.

"My apologies," Zem replied with a smile, not looking guilty in the least.

Karan was now the only one left who had not explained her capabilities.

"Do I have to?" she asked.

"Would you rather not?" Nick responded, and Karan averted her eyes guiltily. That was as clear an answer as any. "No worries, then."

"Huh?"

"I said I wouldn't force you to talk about it. But what do you wanna do in this party?"

"What do I want to do?" Karan repeated with a puzzled expression.

"I can get a good idea of what you can and can't do just by looking at your equipment. You fight up front by cleaving through enemies with that greatsword of yours. There're several different fighting styles you could choose from, though. You could charge full speed ahead and cut down enemies, or you could focus on protecting the rear guard and attack when needed. See what I mean?"

"Sure, but..."

"Decide on your fighting style."

Karan thought about what he said. Her face turned sullen when she realized what he was asking her to do. "Why are you not giving me orders? If you had given me an order when fighting the slimes, we would've had no trouble at all."

"Huh?"

"You're basically our leader, Nick," Karan said peevishly.

Nick shook his head. "I just stepped up for now 'cause I thought someone needed to, but I didn't mean to become the leader. I'll hand off the position the moment any of you say you want it."

"I-is that a good idea?" Karan asked, wide-eyed.

"I dunno. I can't predict the future. All right, let's move on."

"To where?" the other three asked together, looking confused.

"The sun's still high. Let's go to Goblin Forest. We'll have to camp on the way. Are you okay with that?" Nick checked, and they nodded.

"How long will the trek take?" Zem asked.

“Five or six hours by foot. We’ll get there kind of late if we leave now, so I think we should rest on the way and explore the forest first thing in the morning.”

“Hmm... I can get us there in less than half the time.”

“How?”

“I just told you, did I not? I can perform battalion magic. How about it?”

“Do you have enough mana left?”

“That short of a trip will not consume much.”

“Then let’s give it a shot. Whenever you’re ready.”

Zem opened his holy book with his left hand and began an incantation. All priests of the Sanctuary of Medora performed that action when they used magic. Gold light shone under each of their feet and quickly disappeared.

“Okay, it is done. As long as it remains in effect, we will walk faster and not grow fatigued.”

“R-really?” Nick responded dubiously.

“I suppose seeing is believing. Let us be on our way.”

Propelled by Zem’s confidence in his spell, the Survivors departed for Goblin Forest.

The Survivors Bounce Back



“Crazy... We actually got here in three hours. We could be back in our beds tonight, couldn’t we?” Nick said in surprise at the entrance to Goblin Forest. It looked like they still had three or four hours until evening.

“That is entirely possible if we finish our business here quickly,” Zem responded.

“Hey, Zem, can you tell us the details of all the spells you can do?”

The priest answered Nick’s question while counting off his spells with his fingers. “How many do I know again...? First, the spell I just used is a marching support spell called Fleetfoot. I also have a spell called Insulation that maintains body heat regardless of external temperatures. I can use combat support spells such as Invigorate, which raises attack power, and Fortify, which raises defense. As for healing magic, I have Recovery and Full Heal for healing injuries, Detoxification for curing poison from plants and insects, and Checkup to discover any abnormalities in the body. I also have many spells for treating sicknesses, but they are difficult to explain without using medical jargon... Would you like me to try?”

“N-no, I’m good. I don’t think I would understand any of it... Man, you’re ridiculously skilled,” Nick said.

“Am I?”

“You’re good enough to be recruited by an advanced party. It’s nuts that your sanctuary let you go.”

“Ha-ha... I wish they saw it the way you do.” Zem laughed self-mockingly. Nick realized his mistake right away.

“...Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Do not worry about it, Nick. You meant it as a compliment. Also...are we not all way too talented to have been turned on the way we were?”

“Too right.”

Nick and Zem smiled ironically. They both thought it was good that they were able to laugh about their misfortune.

“By the way, do you have enough mana left?” Nick asked.

“Yes. That was not much of a drain. I would be quite fatigued if I used it continuously for a period of days or weeks, but using it for three hours does not expend much mana. I have plenty left for more spell casting,” Zem answered.

“All right... We’ve got time until sunset, so let’s get exploring. But first...” Nick paused and turned serious. “This labyrinth is populated by goblins. They’re not that strong, but unlike slimes, you’ll get hurt if you take ’em lightly. You might even die. We should form a plan. Sound good?”

The other three nodded with serious expressions that matched Nick’s.

“Cool. This place is huge, and we need to keep an eye out for goblins as we move through it. That means—”

“That means it’s my turn. I have a perfect spell for this,” Tiana announced.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“*Magic Search.*” Tiana lifted her staff and performed an incantation.

“...What does that do, Tiana?”

“You don’t know? It’s a spell used to find monsters. I can use it to search within a radius of about three kilometers. It doesn’t work if it’s interrupted by a barrier, and it can’t find powerful monsters that are good at concealing themselves, but it should work on goblins.”

“...Isn’t that a pretty advanced spell?”

As far as Nick knew, there weren’t many adventurers who could use it. Due to his time in the C-rank party Combat Masters, he had a pretty good idea of the skill level of C-rank mages. He wasn’t sure if a single one of them could search for monsters within a three-kilometer radius. Considering D rank and lower, he doubted there was a single mage who could use Magic Search at all.

“Wh-why are you looking at me like that? Did I do something bad?” Tiana asked, mistaking his reaction entirely.

Nick shook his head with an awkward smile. “No, not at all. I’m really impressed. Most adventurers who wield magic can only use one element, and very few can manage both offensive and support magic.”

“It’s nothing special, truly. I just had a good instructor at school.”

“Anyway, I appreciate how skilled you are. Do you detect any monsters?”

“Let’s see... There’s a pack one kilometer to the northeast. There’s ten of them. What should we do, Nick?”

“We can handle ten. Let’s take ’em on.” Nick took up position at

the front of the group and started walking. "This time we'll succeed with flying colors."

Sure enough, there were goblins gathered in the location Tiana indicated. The four party members held their breath and waited for the right time to attack.

"You didn't use much magic last time did you, Tiana?" Nick said.

"I already said I'm sorry," she responded.

"I'm not criticizing you. You were right to hold back."

"Huh?"

"It's really scary getting hit by a spell from behind while fighting. I've been hit in the back before by mages who were just trying to help."

"That must've sucked... Though, I'm hardly in a position to speak."

Tiana herself had accidentally fired a spell at Karan's back earlier, awakening a trauma in Karan's heart. Nick's unfortunate incident was not something she could laugh at right now.

"When you killed monsters in the past, were most of the others around you mages?" Nick asked.

"Yeah," Tiana answered, wondering why he asked that question.

"Mage-only parties don't really have to think about formation. They achieve the highest firepower and defense by lining up next to each other rather than splitting up into a vanguard and rear guard."

"Oh yeah... You're right," she said, seeming to understand his point.

"We need to discuss what to do when we take a more complex formation. It's simple, really. Until you're used to working from the back, all you need to do is fire a spell at the beginning of the fight before Karan and I move forward. The vanguard will then take care of the rest. You won't use any magic while Karan and I are fighting."

Tiana put a hand to her forehead as if she had a headache.

"What's wrong? Are you out of mana, or—?"

"I'm mad at myself for not realizing something so simple," Tiana said with a sigh, and Nick chuckled.

"They say poverty dulls the wit," he joked.

"Right? God, being poor sucks," she complained, gripping her staff.

Nick decided she was ready. "So hit 'em with a spell first thing. The element doesn't matter, but it would help if you used something with a wide area of effect."

"I have a good one. Just watch."

"Awesome. Karan and I will kill the ones that survive. Sound good, Karan?"

Karan nodded silently. She and Tiana were both nervous from having received their first orders.

"Here we go... *Icicle Dance!*" Tiana readied her staff and performed the spell, which fired a great number of sharp icicles over a wide area. Nick and Karan were going to charge forward and fight the goblins that survived the surprise attack...but that turned out to be unnecessary.

"Huh?" Karan uttered.

"...Yep, all ten are dead," Nick said.

The icicles Tiana fired from her staff accurately pierced each of the goblins' skulls. Not a single one moved.

"Uh, let's move on to the next ones!" Tiana exclaimed, using Magic Search with an anxious expression.

"Hold on. I'm not mad at you. If anything, you just saved us time," Nick said.

"R-really?"

"That said, I want to see what Karan and I can do, too. Let's try some things as we kill more goblins."

The Survivors resumed their trek through the forest and set their sights on a pack of five goblins. It was the perfect number for the vanguard to test out their skills.

"It's our turn, Karan."

"O-okay."

Karan's voice shook, and she was gripping her sword tightly. Nick noticed that but elected not to say anything. Saying the wrong thing could just put her under more pressure.

"All right. I've got your back," he said.

Karan raised her trusty Dragonbone Sword overhead. The size of the greatsword was probably going to make it difficult to wield in the dense forest. Ready to do his best to prevent an unsightly defeat, Nick approached the goblins.

"Hrrraaaagh!" Karan screamed, swinging her sword with incredible force. She cut through goblins and trees as if tearing through cloth. The two goblins she killed fell to the ground in two pieces.

"Gyak?!"

The remaining three goblins shrieked as Karan stared them down.

"Take that!" Nick yelled, quickly slaying one with his dagger. That left two. "Karan!"

The remaining goblins entered a state of panic after watching over half of their pack get killed in seconds. They were darting back and forth not far from where Karan was standing. She had a good opportunity to take them out, but for some reason, she didn't move.

"Huh...?"

She stared at Nick blankly, looking unsure of what to do.

“Tch!” Nick clicked his tongue. Accepting that Karan wasn’t going to do anything, he quickly killed one of the remaining goblins. There was now only one left. Realizing it had no choice but to run, the goblin turned its back. That was when Karan finally sprang into action.

“Hi-yah!”

She killed the final goblin with her Dragonbone Sword. Zem and Tiana, who had been watching nervously, breathed a sigh of relief.

“Karan, are you okay?!” Nick asked, approaching Karan and putting his hands on her shoulders. He wasn’t going to scold her—he was simply worried. Despite that, she sprang into a panicked apology.

“S-sorry!”

“Ah, no, I’m not angry. I just wanted to know if you’re not feeling well or something.”

Karan shook her head.

“That’s good... You got off to a good start there, but that doesn’t mean you can space out in the middle of a battle. Be careful.”

“O-okay.”

“That aside, you’re stronger than I expected. You’re good,” Nick said, giving her genuine praise. They were only goblins, but killing two in one swing required serious strength.

“That...was nothing,” Karan replied, turning away abruptly. Nick shrugged in response, but he couldn’t help but find her reaction charming. It was clear she was just embarrassed.

“These goblins are a cinch. I’m the only one who hasn’t been very useful, though...,” Nick muttered. The others looked at him in surprise.

“Oh, stop it,” Tiana said exasperatedly.

“Wh-what?”

“You’re the one who’s been guiding us. Anything we achieve is thanks to you. Can’t you see that?”

“Really? Adventurers are almost always stubborn lowlifes, so I’m just grateful that you guys are actually willing to listen to me...” Nick was aware of what a nag he could be. Other people often found him annoying.

His old party, Combat Masters, had a major flaw. The party consisted of the Weapon Master, which was Argus’s nickname, a samurai, an archer, a light warrior—all people who could only perform physical attacks. Their lack of balance was why they were unable to progress past C rank, but each member individually had the strength of an A-rank adventurer. It defied common sense that a party could reach C rank without using any magic; that was how skilled they were.

Nick was the smallest in stature of the group—and not quite as good as the rest when it came to killing monsters. That was why he decided to try to help the party with his intelligence rather than his strength. He thought up plans for conquering labyrinths efficiently and searched for ways to fill the hole of not having a mage. He knew everything he did was helpful to the party, but the others hated being bossed around by him. No one wanted to follow orders from someone weaker than them.

In order to avoid upsetting them, Nick took care of a variety of chores for the group, including buying medicine and magic items, preparing labyrinth maps, and coordinating with any mages they hired temporarily into the team. He genuinely tried to give advice that would make things easier for his companions, but they still ended up complaining. His new party members were shockingly pleasant to be around by comparison. They might have had some bumps in the road already, but they shared his way of thinking and his values.

“What did you think, Karan? Anything you found easy or difficult about that fight?” Nick asked.

“M-me?” Karan stuttered, flustered by Nick’s sudden question. She spoke after a short silence. “...I am a little confused.”

“About what?”

“In my previous party, no one asked for my opinion. I only ever did what I was told.”

Nick grimaced. Considering the time she had spent working as an adventurer, Karan knew very little about the profession. She was only slightly better than Tiana and Zem. She had just a vague memory of the beginner labyrinths her previous party had visited, and she had never even collected monster parts.

Adventurers would normally never turn out this way. No matter their skill, a rookie’s party members would make sure they learned the basics to prevent them from becoming a hindrance down the line. On the other hand, if a party did not intend to keep the rookie around long-term, and instead only brought them into the group to deceive and kill them, it would be convenient to keep them as ignorant as possible.

Nick felt revolted thinking of such people. Karan mistakenly believed the anger on his face was meant for her, and she got scared.

“S-sorry.”

“It’s not your fault...,” Nick responded.

“I...can’t do anything but fight.”

“Yeah... That is a problem.”

Karan hung her head, thinking Nick was mad at her. His next words caught her off guard.

“So remember this. I’ll teach you everything I know, but I won’t

go easy on you.”

“Are you sure? That is not the kind of thing you should just teach anyone...”

“We’ll all be in trouble if you don’t become more capable as an adventurer. You remember when I told you not to trust me when I said we should form a party, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t know when to doubt someone if you don’t have the necessary knowledge and wit. That’s why you need to learn quickly. Learn how to recognize when someone’s acting strange or if what they’re saying doesn’t add up. You’ll need that ability in this party. Got it?”

“O-okay...”

Karan nodded to show her understanding, but she still looked apprehensive.

“Lightning Burst!”

Electricity surged from Tiana’s staff and fried a pack of goblins. A few avoided the spell, but Nick killed them with his dagger. They once again took down a group of monsters without the vanguard having to expend much effort.

“Sweet! How many is that now?” Tiana asked.

“We’ve killed thirty-four, I think. We’re going at a good pace,” Nick answered, smiling with satisfaction. Tiana and Zem were handling their first day of labyrinth exploration quite well. They were like sponges with how quickly they adapted to labyrinth exploration and the mental preparation needed to fight monsters, and Nick thought a few more adventures would be all they needed to reach the skill of an average adventurer.

Karan, on the other hand, looked lifeless. “...Sorry, I messed up,” she apologized.

“Don’t worry about it. I was in a better position to get that one,” Nick replied.

Today was the first time Nick had ever seen Karan fight, but he could tell she was more skilled than she had shown. The strength and ability to wield a greatsword with ease could not be gained overnight. Something simply caused her to freeze up.

“I still feel bad,” she said. Naturally, Karan was fully aware of the struggles that Nick picked up on. She also knew the cause. “I swear I can do better than this.”

She wasn’t struggling because she was scared of the monsters. What scared her was exploring labyrinths with other people. Nick—and Tiana and Zem, for that matter—remembered the traumatic incident Karan had told them about on the day they first met. There

was no way being deceived and left to die at the bottom of a labyrinth wouldn't leave an emotional scar. To make matters worse, Tiana's misfire in Gooley Waterworks had reminded her of that fear.

That isn't the kind of experience one can recover from right away, Nick thought. But he was still worried about her. If she was unable to conquer her fear of adventuring right here, she would likely end up needing a lot of time to do so. It was possible she would never conquer it.

Tiana drew Nick out of his thoughts with anxiety in her voice. "I sense monsters... There are about twenty of them to the north. But..."

"What's wrong?"

"They all have a lot of mana for goblins..."

"Really? Can you tell how much?"

"Yeah, they have about three times as much as usual. One of them has five times as much."

"...That's bad."

"Do you know what they are?"

"Yeah. It's probably a pack of hobgoblins...and an ogre," Nick answered nervously. "There are times in the year when the miasma becomes especially thick, and the goblins evolve into hobgoblins. Hobgoblins are the boss of this labyrinth. Apparently, if a hobgoblin is allowed to live for too long, it'll evolve into the next level up—an ogre. An intermediate party might be able to handle this, but it'll be tough for a group of novices."

"Then what should we do, Nick? Retreat?" Zem asked. Nick hesitated, then shook his head.

"Well..."

"Is something the matter?"

"If there's an ogre, it'll attract other packs of goblins and steadily increase the size of its pack. It'll attack a nearby village or town if we leave it alone. Some settlements have actually been destroyed that way. That's why it's proper etiquette for novice adventurers to retreat back to the guild and report it so that a subjugation squad can be put together."

"Then we should retreat—"

"No, wait. Only novice adventurers are supposed to retreat. Intermediate parties are expected to hold their ground and kill 'em themselves. We need to choose between calling for help or taking it on."

Nick looked at each of them in turn. They had a mage who could use multiple elements, a former priest who could harness healing and support magic, a dragonian warrior who could wield a greatsword with ease, and a light warrior who was once a member of a C-rank party. He doubted anyone would consider them novices.

“We have the strength to take down an ogre. People might see it as a violation of etiquette if we choose to run instead of fight. And regardless of etiquette and unwritten rules, this pack will leave the labyrinth and begin attacking human settlements if left alone. That can’t be allowed to happen.”

“That is for certain,” Zem agreed.

“And that’s not all. There’s one more important thing we need to consider.”

“What is that?”

Nick responded despairingly. “We’re all broke. All we’ve collected so far is thirty goblin ears and some slime cores. That’s not paying for everyone’s lodging expenses. We’d have to kill at least fifty or sixty goblins...”

““““Ah.””””

That was all the other three could say. They had been so thrilled about their success in the labyrinth that they had forgotten about the state of their wallets.

“We should kill the ogre to protect the nearby settlements—and earn the money to support ourselves while we’re at it. That’s our only option,” Nick said.

“We do seem to have no choice... What chance do we have of killing it?” Zem asked. Tiana’s expression turned grim.

“Ogres are easy targets for spells because of their size, but they’re resistant to magic... I probably can’t do it myself. I can restrain it, though,” she answered.

“Yeah. That means Karan and I’ll have to finish the job,” Nick said.

“I can use support magic. I will use Fortify to increase your defense and Invigorate to boost your attack power. I am afraid that is all I will be useful for... I have no means to fight an ogre directly,” Zem muttered weakly.

Nick looked at Karan. “Hey, Karan. Have you fought an ogre before?”

“No. But I have fought an enemy stronger than an ogre. Mostly by myself.”

“No way. What was it?”

“...The pot snake.”

“Ah...”

Nick had never been to Pot Snake Cave. Combat Masters refrained from attempting it because the party wasn’t suited for it. They were fully aware that they would have a hard time.

The pot snake’s poison was a problem, but it was already plenty strong without taking that into account, and it had significantly greater defense than ogres. If she had fought the pot snake one-on-

one, she would have no trouble with an ogre.

That meant her strength wasn't the issue.

"Karan, we need your power... I can't handle an ogre alone. We'll have to rely on you to kill it, but... What do you wanna do?" Nick asked with concern. Zem and Tiana realized the problem as well.

Telling Karan she would have to do most of the actual fighting was exactly what her former party told her before they left her to die. The deathly pale look on Karan's face made it clear what she was feeling.

When Nick asked her that question, Karan had a thought.

"I..."

I want to go home. I want to return to my village.

This forest couldn't have been any more different from her village and its clear-blue skies. She missed the days in the brick house where she grew up, helping her mother with chores and getting scolded whenever she tried to help her father with his work. She always complained when her mother made her help draw water and prepare breakfast, but while it was a pain, it was nice seeing her surly father's expression soften whenever he saw that she contributed. Karan wanted to experience those kinds of mornings again.

It was the mother's job in the dragonian village to prepare food, but it was the role of the head of the family—the father—to light the stove. Lighting fires—whether it be for a bonfire or a stove—was an important ritual for the fire dragon line of dragonians. Karan was jealous that her father could light the stove, and she pestered him constantly to let her do it. He would get her to stop by saying he would allow her to after she became an adult in dragonian society, but she still hadn't received the privilege.

She wanted to be an adult as soon as possible. She wanted to support the hero and gain the respect of everyone in her village, just like in the dragonian legend. But while she held that dream, a part of her also wanted to be able to tuck into bed at night having experienced the joy of a normal life.

When her dragon king gem was stolen, Karan thought she would be unable to return home and face her parents until she found it. The desire to return home never once crossed her mind. The shock was too great, and she was unable to collect her thoughts. Now, however, she had regained some composure. She said she was unable to trust others, but as she worked with her new companions, she found herself able to break free from her intense loneliness and sadness.

That enabled her to think straight and realize what she had done to herself. What was she doing here? Why had she placed herself in a situation that would just drag up the unpleasant memories of when

she was betrayed? That was what was causing Karan to freeze from fear.

She could guarantee her own survival by throwing everything away and returning to her village. She didn't have the money for the traveling expenses, but she would make it eventually if she appealed to the compassion of people she passed on the journey to receive empathy and charity. Her father would likely be devastated when he learned that she lost the dragon king gem. She would be a disgrace to her family.

Regardless of her reception at home, however, she would not be left to die. She would be able to return to a comfortable life surrounded by love. She would just have to deal with contempt and a shred of pity.

Karan's horizons had broadened significantly since she left home and came into contact with both the fearsome and kind sides of humanity. She now saw a path that she had been oblivious to before—the coward's path. The path's destination was sweet and tempting.

By contrast, her current path brought with it the extremely painful possibility of her new companions using her the same way that Callios did. She understood that they were different from Callios's group. Nick said he would entrust her with the safe. Tiana admitted her misfire—and even apologized. Zem supported her and Tiana without a word of complaint.

But shaking the thought of the worst possibility from her mind remained difficult. If anything, finding companions she wanted to believe in only made her think of the pain she would feel upon their betrayal. The more she thought about not wanting to be double-crossed, the more her imagination ran wild.

There was only one way to guarantee she wouldn't be betrayed—betray them first. She could just forget about the ogre, forget about her new party, forget about recovering the dragon king gem, and flee Labyrinth City on her own. That course would free her from anxiety. She could obtain peace and a comfortable life in her hometown. Being asked if she could trust her companions and fight while those tempting thoughts raced through her mind sent a fearful chill down her spine.

Everything would have been so much easier if she had been forced into fighting in fear or taking the coward's way out. She would have been able to accept either one. Being given a choice, however, meant she had to choose between fighting or fleeing of her own volition. Karan hated Nick for forcing her to make this decision.

The Dragonbone Sword—one of the few possessions left to her—felt very heavy in her hands. She would have felt no shame about fleeing if she had nothing left and had been unable to meet anyone.

She would have given into that sweet path without hesitation.

"Nick," Karan muttered, saying the name of the man she hated at that moment.

"...What'll it be, Karan?" he asked.

"It's okay. I can do it."

Despite everything she felt, Karan couldn't betray the sword in her hands or the people who were reaching out to help her.

Nick hesitated upon seeing Karan's tense face. Regardless of what she wanted, would this fight be a mistake? Or was the mistake bringing her here in her current mental state in the first place?

"...Actually, we should leave," Nick said.

"Huh?"

"Let's return to the guild and leave this to an intermediate party with nothing else to do. We can hit a different labyrinth and make enough money there to stay afloat. We should manage if we camp out and explore for two or three more days."

"...I can do it. I don't want to run," Karan repeated.

"You don't have to—"

"I said I can do it!" she yelled.

"Don't shout, you nitwit!" Nick admonished, slapping a hand over her mouth. Karan had surprised herself with that shout, and she held her breath and looked around to see if any monsters had heard her.

Tiana signaled with her fingers that they were clear. She had quickly used Magic Search to check on the ogre and hobgoblins.

"...Are you sure you can do this?" Nick asked.

"Definitely," Karan replied.

She was unyielding. If they backed down here, Karan might never be able to bring herself to work as an adventurer again. Nick knew of a few adventurers who had been overwhelmed by fear like she was feeling now and forced to retire. If she was going to continue working as an adventurer, there was value in taking on this battle.

Both retreating and fighting had their pros and cons. Nick truly wished they could spend more time discussing it. Problem was, he didn't think the ogre was going to wait. It was going to move eventually, and there was a chance it would notice them.

They didn't have time. Knowing that, Nick made his decision.

"All right. Let's do this."

"Are you sure?" Zem asked, sounding worried.

"We've come this far. There's no turning back now, so get ready," Nick said, not taking no for an answer.

He didn't have an elaborate strategy. Zem was going to strengthen Karan and Nick. Tiana was going to wipe out the hobgoblins with

Icicle Dance. Nick was then going to use his dagger to distract the ogre so Karan could finish it off. That was all. An ogre was well within their capabilities if they all fought to their full potential.

“...There it is,” Nick said.

They found the hobgoblins and the ogre while using the trees for cover. Unlike goblins, the ogre and the hobgoblins had red skin. Hobgoblins were a bit shorter than the average human. The ogre was significantly taller, and its head was twice as large. It was holding a crude club that looked like it was made from a fallen tree trunk and was as thick as a person. It didn’t take an expert to see that the ogre’s size alone made it a threat.

But they had come this far. There was no going back now.

“Here we go... *Fortify. Invigorate.*” A faint white light emerged from Zem’s palms and surrounded Nick and Karan. “The effect lasts for thirty minutes. Be careful.”

“Thanks,” Nick responded.

“Okay,” Karan said.

Tiana then began concentrating mana into her staff. “All good here... Are you ready?” she asked, looking at Karan instead of Nick.

Karan was tightly gripping the handle of her Dragonbone Sword. Nick spoke to her in a kind whisper. “Are you scared, Karan?”

“...! O-of course not!” she exclaimed.

“That’s amazing. I’m feeling pretty scared, myself.”

“...Don’t lie. You were C rank. You must have fought monsters that strong.”

“Yeah, ogres and hobgoblins aren’t that scary. Mainly ’cause it’s clear that they’re enemies.” Karan fell silent at Nick’s words. “What I’m scared about is whether I can trust my new companions. Don’t you feel the same?”

Karan’s grip loosened slightly. “I know you three are different from the people who betrayed me. But...”

“We’ve only known each other for a few days. It’s natural to still feel uncomfortable around us. That’s why I want you to doubt me, Karan.”

“Huh...?”

“That goes for you guys, too, Tiana and Zem. Determine if I’m worthy of your trust.”

“What are you...? This is hardly the time to say things like that,” Tiana scolded.

“She is right, Nick,” Zem agreed.

Nick ignored them. “Go ahead and cast the spell, Tiana.”

“...Whatever. Don’t blame me if this goes poorly! *Icicle Dance!*”

Dozens of icicles shot out of Tiana’s staff. And so the fight with the boss of Goblin Forest began.

The thin icicles fired rained on the hobgoblins like arrows.

“GYAAAAH!”

“WHAT THAT?!”

“HUMAN ATTACK!”

The hobgoblins and the ogre bellowed angrily with broken language.

“Wow, you guys have evolved enough to speak? Color me impressed!” Nick charged straight for the monsters. Alone.

“N-Nick?! Why did you not wait for Karan?!” Zem yelled.

Karan was late. She had hesitated and looked back before they were supposed to charge into battle, expecting to be abandoned again. That was a fear she was unable to get over. But when she turned around, Nick wasn't there. He noticed her hesitation and intentionally took off alone.

“Shoot!” She grunted and raced forward. A hobgoblin jumped in front of her to impede her progress. She cut it down, but it succeeded in delaying her.

“GAH-HA-HA! YOU THINK FOUR ENOUGH TO KILL US? FOOLS!” the ogre taunted.

“These ‘fools’ are gonna send you to your grave,” Nick responded, readying his dagger. The giant monster just laughed derisively. It clearly thought they had no chance, and it might even have felt a little pity for them.

“HMPH! DIE!” The ogre swung its enormous club down.

“Nick!”

Karan swept her sword at a group of hobgoblins that were surrounding her. There were too many of them for Tiana to kill by herself, and Karan couldn't force her way through them.

A tremendously loud boom echoed.

“GUH?!”

It was the sound of the ogre's club striking the ground. Nick dodged it nimbly and immediately leaped onto the club, using it as a platform to slash the ogre's arms with his dagger.

“Take that, you smelly oaf!”

Now truly angry, the ogre waved its arms about violently. Its swings were random and far from elegant but still difficult to avoid given their fast and irregular nature. If one hit, it would have been death.

Nick dodged them without difficulty. He slipped under the ogre's large arms, circled around behind it, and slashed at its open back. Without a pause, he switched to an underhand grip. He began to dodge and slash in the same movements, and he even took advantage of the ogre's quickness to deliver strong blows no one would expect from his small dagger.

The raging ogre writhed in pain, then twisted its body to turn around and kick at him. Nick dodged it by getting low and made use of his position by slashing at the inside of its thigh. Every time the ogre attacked, he was waiting with a counter.



An unfamiliar fear raced down the ogre's back. It rampaged to try to shake off the feeling, and Nick increased his speed to match. Their fight had a balletic beauty. The other Survivors and the hobgoblins all watched in astonishment.

"WHO ARE YOU? YOU FASTER THAN MONKEY..."

"Thanks for the compliment. My instructor always got mad at me for being a slowpoke."

"WH-WHAT?"

"My instructor, Argus, is a genius who mastered every weapon. Fittingly, his school of combat is called Weapon Master, and that doubles as his nickname. I studied under him."

"WEAPON MASTER, YOU SAY? I ONLY SEE DAGGER!"

"Yep. I lack the physical gifts to be proficient with a sword, ax, longbow, or anything else useful for killing monsters. That doesn't mean I learned nothing. For example..."

The ogre aimed backward at Nick with its heel. As if he had been waiting for just that, Nick kicked the ogre's unstable pivot foot with all his might using an iron-plated shoe. The attack didn't do much to hurt the ogre, but he succeeded in knocking it off-balance.

"GAH?!"

The ogre fell, just as Nick intended. The heavier the body, the more force they put into their legs. Nick took advantage of that.

"I'm proficient at dagger arts—learned directly from Argus, the current instructor of the Weapon Master school. I'm skilled at hand-to-hand combat as well."

Nick continued his assault. He used the trees to hide from sight as he jabbed with his dagger and leaped like a cat to avoid its big swings. The ogre was wounded all over in no time.

As Tiana watched Nick's furious efforts, she whispered, "...Hey, Zem."

"Yes, Tiana?" Zem responded.

"Didn't Nick say he couldn't kill the ogre on his own?"

"Indeed, he did."

"He's stronger than he let on..."

"Evidently..."

Seeing Tiana and Zem converse as they killed the hobgoblins, Nick shouted at them angrily. "Don't just watch! Gimme some help here! There's only so much a dagger can do!"

"You look like you're doing just fine to me. If you're good at hand-to-hand combat, you can...I don't know, strangle it or something," Tiana said, feigning ignorance.

"I'd be able to do that with a big human but not an ogre! They're

frickin' huge! Anyway, Karan!"

"Y-yes?"

"Help me, will you?!"

Karan sprang to action at those words. The Dragonbone Sword became lighter in her hands, and she killed multiple hobgoblins in one swing.

"GWUH?! YOU LOWLY HUMAN!" the ogre said in frustration.

"It's right; I'm just a lowly human! I can't last much longer here!" Nick yelled.

Nick may have been toying with the ogre, but it was far from easy for him. It took every bit of his concentration to dodge and provoke it. The tiniest slipup would have probably gotten him bludgeoned by the ogre, and one hit would have put him in critical condition. Getting hit in the wrong place could have meant instant death.

"DIE, HUMAN!"

Nick's attacks came in succession, but they didn't inflict lethal damage. Dozens of slash and stab wounds might have been enough to kill the ogre, but that would require a high-wire act of avoiding any interference and making no mistakes. The tables would turn the moment the hobgoblins got in his way. That was how risky this situation was.

"DAMMIT! UNDERLINGS, OBSTRUCT THIS HUMAN!"

The ogre came to the same realization. The remaining hobgoblins rushed to the ogre's aid, turning their backs on Tiana, Zem, and Karan.

"Look out, Nick!" Tiana shouted.

Tiana's Icicle Dance spell was powerful, but its wide area of effect meant that plenty of hobgoblins escaped harm. Karan's sword was huge, but no matter how easily she wielded it, she could only kill one at a time. Zem swung his mace with determination, but he couldn't kill as many as Karan.

One of the hobgoblins that survived made to spring at Nick.

"YES! KILL HIM!" the ogre cheered. This was the moment that would turn the fight in its favor.

"Hrraaaagh!"

Just then, Karan spat a ball of fire from her mouth.

"GAAAAAAH!"

The intense flames engulfed the hobgoblin before it reached Nick, charring it black in seconds. Nick and the ogre were both stunned by what they just witnessed. Karan paid them no mind and readied her sword.

"Nick!" she shouted.

"What, Karan?" Nick responded.

"I...I am Karan Tsubaki, daughter of the chief of the Tsubaki Clan!

I am a proud dragonian warrior with the divine protection of the fire dragon!"

The blade of Karan's Dragonbone Sword blazed with bright-red fire. A heat wave so intense it felt like it could burn through skin radiated from the sword. The hobgoblins that had clung to survival tried to charge at Karan, but Tiana wasn't going to allow that.

"Ice Spear!"

A single shard of ice pierced a hobgoblin through the heart. Unlike Icicle Dance and its wide area of effect, Ice Spear was a pinpoint spell used to take out one target.

"I didn't screw up this time! Now it's your turn, Karan!" Tiana yelled.

"I know!" Karan responded. Most of the hobgoblins were dead, leaving none to get in Karan's way.

"WHAT THAT STRENGTH... GWUH?!"

Realizing its disadvantage, the ogre quickly jumped back from Nick. That put it in a one-on-one fight with Karan. It was too late for the ogre.

"Fire Dragon Slash!"

Karan swung her blazing greatsword down and cleaved the ogre's body in two from its shoulder to its hip.

In the depths of Goblin Forest, the corpses of the hobgoblins and the ogre covered the ground.

"Collecting parts from ogres and other related monsters is tough on the stomach. I don't really wanna do it...," Nick grumbled as he used pliers to wrench one of the ogre's horns off its head.

"Geez, that's what you have to do?" Tiana said.

"That looks quite hard...," Zem commented.

"That's gross," Karan declared.

"Well, you better get used to it. There's a lot of monsters, so you guys are gonna help," Nick said, handing them each a pair of pliers. "Pull off the hobgoblin's horns just like I did with the ogre. It's similar to plucking out a child's tooth when they have a cavity. These horns are imbued with mana, so they sell for much more than goblin ears."

"Understood...," Zem responded.

"Urgh... Being an adventurer is hard...," Tiana complained.

Their shoulders drooped, but they got to work just as Nick instructed them. Karan remained by Nick's side.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Karan? Do you not understand how to do it?"

"...Sorry about earlier."

"Ah...yeah."

Karan froze when it was time to fight the ogre. She probably

meant to charge at the ogre together with Nick but had been unable to get her body to listen to her mind. Nick had experienced that before.

"Think about what you should do next time we wind up in a similar situation. That's good enough for me. I'll teach you everything you don't know, so don't ever pretend like you know something you don't."

"Why are you helping me, Nick?"

"I dunno," Nick said, scratching his head and averting his eyes. "I can't explore labyrinths on my own. That ogre really would've been impossible for me without help. I could cut it and knock it over, but I couldn't finish it off."

"Anyone could help you fight. That can't be it."

"What're you gettin' at?"

"...Never mind," Karan said, but she didn't look satisfied.

Half ignoring her, Nick pinched the horn of a nearby hobgoblin with his pliers. He wrenched it out with a *pop*.

"Here, get started," Nick instructed.

"Okay," Karan responded, taking a pair of pliers from Nick. She applied the pliers to a hobgoblin horn in imitation of Nick as he watched over her. "I don't want to trust others ever again."

"Same."

"I hate people who say nice things and then betray you."

"Totally."

"But I keep my promises. I don't want to be betrayed, but I don't want to be a traitor, either."

"I know how you feel."

"...I'll do my best."

Karan tugged on the horn, and it came out easily. She did it even more skillfully than Nick.

"Wow, you're good," Nick said, impressed.

"Thanks. I can handle this," Karan responded with a smile, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"All right, I'll get back to it, too... Wait, why is this one so hard?" Nick tried to pull out a hobgoblin's horn, but it wouldn't come out no matter how hard he pulled. It felt like it was stuck on something. "This one was in the process of evolving. We woulda been in trouble if there had been two ogres... *Nggrgh!*" He pulled as hard as he could. "Whuh?!"

Nick let himself get careless. He was normally never one to take collecting monster parts lightly, but his success at leading this party had given him a bit of a big head. This resulted in him pulling too hard on the hobgoblin's horn and falling backward when it came out.

"Wha—?!" Karan shrieked.

"Ouch! Oh, s-sorry!" Nick said.

He fell toward Karan, knocking her down and pinning her to the ground beneath him.

“I-idiot! What are you doing?!” Karan shouted.

Karan’s body was surprisingly soft given her rough personality, and Nick panicked and lost all ability to think. Karan’s red-faced protest brought him back to his senses, and he quickly apologized and tried to get up.

“Sorry, I’m getting u— Huh?”

He hit something with his pliers and heard a crack. *Crap, I broke the hobgoblin horn*, Nick thought, but he saw something he didn’t expect when he looked at the pliers.

“Is that...a pendant?”

Nick’s pliers had hit a swan-shaped pendant that had fallen on the ground and broken it in two.

“Eh?”

“Oh.”

Nick and Karan both gasped wordlessly.

“““HUHHHH?!”””

The screams of the two adventurers echoed throughout Goblin Forest.

A Short Rest



Having finished their treks into the G-rank labyrinths, the Survivors were promoted to F rank. Of more immediate importance, they made enough money to pay their inn charges and rent. They had all been living day-to-day with their lodging situations, and everyone other than Tiana was prepared for the miserable fate of sleeping outdoors. Tiana wasn't willing to go that far, but she was ready to forgo gambling and borrow money to pay her rent.

Fortunately, that resolve had proven unnecessary. They had turned their lives around. The newfound stability set their minds at ease, and they all began to smile more.

The malice that seemed to seep from Tiana's every pore vanished, and she no longer had her guard up all the time. Other adventurers came to notice her beauty, and some were bold enough to invite her into their party or flirt. They were all met with the same ruthless rejection.

The degenerate air around Zem abated. His self-hatred seemed to lessen as well. He occasionally made very sarcastic comments about himself, but they were intended for laughs—there was no hint of his previous desire for self-destruction.

Karan also no longer projected the aura of a wounded beast. She was so cheerful she seemed like an entirely different person, and she might have become the most popular person among the adventurers who frequented the Newbies Adventurers Guild. Everyone Karan addressed responded with a smile.

Nick changed the least out of everyone. However, word of how he formed the Survivors party and rehabilitated the lives of a group of suspicious people circulated among the employees of the Adventurers Guild. He was treated more amicably when trading items for money at

reception, and he never had to wait as long as he used to, either. The goodwill he received had him naturally smiling more as well.

Over time, the Survivors ceased their unconscious hostility toward the friendly adventurers in the guild, and the guild employees no longer treated them as dangerous individuals. Their work also went well. They challenged and conquered F-rank labyrinths, traded the parts they collected for money, and used that money to support themselves. In just two weeks after forming the party, they had established a healthy work cycle and become proper adventurers.

Even so, Nick had two concerns. The first was that while they were making the minimum amount of money to cover lodging and food, they weren't making enough to spend on their hobbies. He had been resisting the urge to go to idol concerts.

His other concern weighed heavily on his mind.

"Karan is really mad, isn't she...?"

Nick sighed to himself while sitting on a bench in the park. He was still thinking about the pendant he broke in Goblin Forest. For some reason, Karan smiled and forgave him on the spot. But the care with which she handled the pendant made it clear it was important to her.

"Is she not acting angry 'cause she doesn't wanna hurt my feelings? No, that's not her personality..."

Nick rested his chin on his hands and brooded. Fretting over it himself wasn't going to get him an answer, though. Just when he thought that he should return to the inn and get to bed before he wasted money in an attempt to cheer himself up, someone spoke to him.

"Hey, you're that stray dog from before."

"Who're you calling a stray dog?" Nick retorted, turning in the direction of the voice.

"Wow, you've cleaned up. Guess I can't call you that anymore, huh?"

He saw a familiar girl smiling at him. She had navy blue hair and a smile to die for. He met her sitting on this very bench and had seen her face many times onstage.

"Oh, AGG—"

"Nope, none of that please," Agate said, putting a hand over Nick's mouth to stop him from yelling her idol nickname. "I'm not Aggie right now. I'm just an ordinary girl enjoying a day off. Got it?"

There was no arguing with a request like that from your favorite idol.

"O-okay," Nick responded.

"Also, if you tell anyone about our meeting here or try to follow me, I'll drag you to the Sun Knights and ban you from our concerts.

Keep that in mind,” she warned. Overwhelmed, Nick could only nod.

Agate smiled cheerfully. “Very good.”

Nick wasn’t the least bit angry at her threat—instead, he was thanking the gods for bringing them together. He searched frantically for something to say.

“Um... What are you doing here?”

“My talent agency is nearby. This was a good location for surprise concerts and training, but now we have to move the agency because most of our fans found it. We’ve been getting ambushed every day by guys waiting for us to leave,” she explained, looking at Nick accusingly.

“Th-this is a coincidence, I swear! You found me here before I even knew who you were, remember?!” Nick said defensively.

“Relax; I’m joking. So is something troubling you again? You look much better than you did last time, though.”

“Yeah, I...was in a really bad state.”

“I could tell. You looked like you were going to die if no one spoke to you.”

“You’re not wrong.”

Nick broke out in a smile as he thought back on the state he was in. He had just gone through a really rough experience. He still didn’t want to relive those memories. But he managed to carry on with his life. His party members were doing the same, despite the misfortune they went through.

“Well, looks like I don’t need to worry about you anymore. Guess talking to you was a waste of time,” Agate said.

“N-no, it wasn’t a waste,” Nick responded.

“I mean, it’s an idol’s job to cheer people up and give them courage. I have no incentive to bother with people who are already happy.”

“That sounds really messed up when you put it like that.”

“Do you always take jokes at face value?” Agate giggled.

For a moment, she looked just like she did when she performed onstage as an idol. The Agate before him and the Agate he saw in concert were definitely one and the same. He wanted to thank her for helping him turn his life around, but the words wouldn’t come out. He was always much more honest with his words when he was cheering her on at her concerts, but saying that now would be awkward, and he felt like it would end their conversation.

He blurted out a question instead. “Why did you speak to me and give me that ticket back then?”

“I was just doing my job. More fans equals more revenue.”

“You really can be blunt.”

“Why else would I have given you the ticket?”

"I-is that really why?"

"I'm joking. I told you when I gave it to you. I had too many for my family and didn't know what to do with it. Throwing it away felt like a waste."

"Oh..."

"Do you never have moments like that? When you suddenly get a desire to do something good? Like giving your bread to a hungry puppy or looking for a lost child's parents," Agate asked.

Before Nick went to that first concert, he would've immediately answered no. But being saved by her had changed his way of thinking.

"Well...yeah, I do," he answered.

"There you go. So what happened? You look down."

"Well..."

Nick summed up the events since he met her. He focused on how he formed an adventurer's party made up of people who had been through similar circumstances. He didn't mention how big of a fan of hers he had become. She already knew about that, but saying it to her face was too embarrassing.

"I see; you broke your friend's pendant," Agate said when he finished.

"I should pay her back for it or something, right?" Nick asked.

"No, I don't think it's a money problem."

"I know that, but I don't know how else to make up for it! I apologized, and she just forgave me right away..."

"Then maybe she really doesn't care?"

"...But think about it. If someone broke an accessory you loved so much you took it to work with you, would you want to forgive them?"

"Hmm, I guess I'd be pretty mad."

"Right?"

"But if she was mad, she wouldn't have forgiven you."

"She might just be saying that. She probably hasn't forgiven me deep down."

"You can't possibly know that." Agate sounded exasperated.

"S-sure, but—"

"If you insist on apologizing, why not buy her another one?" Agate suggested.

"Hmm..." Nick thought of that right after he broke it. Unfortunately, Karan said no and shoved the pendant in her pocket when he asked to see it. He didn't remember what it looked like, and getting another look at it would be difficult.

"It would be hard finding the exact same thing, though. Why don't you get her a present that you picked out? That might be better."

"...I might have to."

"You say that, but you're the one who wants to give her

something as an apology.”

“It’s not that I want to. It’s more...”

“Don’t forget: She forgave you. That means there’s hope you can patch things up. You might just be imagining her anger.”

“...Really?” Nick still felt unsatisfied. But when he asked himself if he wanted to get her something or not, the former won out. “Eh, I guess I’ll do it.”

“Problem solved, then. See you later.”

“O-okay.” Nick almost tried to stop her but thought better of it. Agate was a highly popular idol. She lived in a different world than him. He decided to face her and say what he needed to say.

“Um, thank you. I wouldn’t have recovered the way I did without you.”

“Thank me by coming to our concerts and buying our merchandise. Oh yeah, you haven’t been at any of our recent shows, have you?” she asked.

“Y-you noticed?”

“I usually remember the people in the front row. It’s not a big deal, I guess. I just thought it was a little ungrateful. I’m used to people cheating on us with other idols.”

“I-I’m not seeing other idols!” Nick yelled, flustered. Agate giggled at his response.

“I’m kidding. It’s important that you take care of yourself. Please continue to work hard—and support me when you can. Also, make sure to apologize to that girl if you’ve decided you want to.”

“Don’t worry; I will.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Agate smiled, then left with a wave.

After Agate left, Nick went to Labyrinth City’s Hammer Alley. Many blacksmiths worked there, and people often visited to buy weapons and armor. The street apparently gained its name from the continuous sound of hammers striking metal. Merchants selling items unrelated to blacksmithing eventually showed up aiming for the customers buying weapons and armor, which then created a demand for restaurants to visit as people bargained, and the street developed into a shopping district that catered to more than just adventurers. There were a few stores that sold clothes and jewelry, and Nick decided to check them out.

“How do you like this silverwork, sir?” a jewelry store employee asked Nick while rubbing her hands together.

“...It’s flower-shaped,” Nick responded.

“Does your girlfriend not like flowers? That’s unusual.”

“No, she’s not my girlfriend. And I don’t know if she likes

flowers.”

“...Hmm, let me think.”

The employee gave him a fake smile. She recommended more items, but none of them felt right, and Nick ended up leaving without buying anything.

“That was a bit rude of me... Haah,” Nick sighed.

His stomach began grumbling. He hadn’t eaten anything since morning. The inn he was staying at didn’t offer breakfast. He normally bought ingredients and bread to make meals himself, but it would be a pain to return all the way to the inn for lunch.

Thinking he should get something to eat, Nick looked at the restaurants and stalls on the street. The merchants on this street were picky about what restaurants they used as their negotiating grounds, resulting in fierce competition between the restaurants. They all had a reputation for being very good.

“What are you doing, Nick?”

“Wha—?!”

Nick spun around and saw Karan. “Wh-what a coincidence,” he said.

“Mm-hmm. What are you doing here?” Karan asked again.

“Just doing a little shopping. Are you here to eat?”

“Yeah.” Karan showed him an item she was holding wrapped in paper.

“Ah, you got cart food. Is that an octolegs?” Nick asked.

An octolegs was a mollusk caught in the seas near Labyrinth City. It looked like an octopus with a shell, and the taste was somewhere in between an octopus and a shellfish. They were resilient and didn’t have to be frozen with magic to be transported like fish did, so they were beloved in Labyrinth City as the taste of the nearby sea.

“Yeah. This is grilled octolegs. It’s a ball made of wheat flour containing sliced-up octolegs,” Karan answered.

“Whoa, that sounds good.”

“...Do you want to try?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Karan offered Nick the skewer with the round ball on it. The steam coming from it suggested it was freshly grilled.

“Is there no sauce?” Nick asked. Normally, grilled octolegs was coated with vinegar or sauce made with potherbs and chili peppers. This ball, however, didn’t have anything on it.

“It’s fine. Eat it like that,” Karan insisted.

“Hmm... Ouch!”

“Ah, sorry. Is it too hot?”

“No... It’s really good. There are chopped-up pickles in it.”

The pickles added a sour taste to the grilled octolegs that made up for the lack of sauce. It satisfied Nick's hunger and relieved his stress. Karan looked at peace as well—she was clearly enjoying her day off. She didn't seem to be worried about the broken pendant at all.

"What is it?" Karan asked.

"Oh, uh..." Nick trailed off. He couldn't say it was nothing. He needed to ask her. "Is there anything you want, Karan?"

"The safe."

"You're gonna have to wait a little longer for that. Good safes cost a lot of money... Anyway, we'll have to buy that as a party. I mean, something more personal."

"Huh? What kind of question is that...?"

"There must be something. Like some kind of a—" He was about to say "accessory" but pivoted mid-word. "Armor. Maybe a shin guard."

"I don't need any armor."

"Then what about a weapon...? Nah, I guess you're good there, too."

Karan was carrying her favorite greatsword on her back.

"You call that the Dragonbone Sword, right?"

"Yeah. It's made with dragon bones and iron, and it draws out the power of the dragonians. But..."

"But what?"

"The most important thing is that it's indestructible," Karan said with a boastful smile.

"Oh yeah... The blade didn't bend at all when you cleaved through the ogre's giant body. You don't even see intermediate adventurers with a weapon this good," Nick praised.

"H-huh."

Nick looked at the sword admiringly. Karan probably expected him to be annoyed by her boasting, and she looked away in embarrassment.

"What's there to be shy about? It really is amazing," Nick said.

"Sh-shut up," Karan stammered, folding her arms angrily.

"Okay, okay."

After a short silence, Karan began to speak slowly. "My dad gave it to me. My ancestors wielded this sword, and it was even used in the war against the demons. My dad said there are lots of strong and bad people in the human lands, and that I should wear the sword for people to see to avoid being taken advantage of."

"You've got a good dad."

"But...I didn't have a clue." Karan shook her head gently. "I almost died, and my most important possession was stolen. It's been one thing after another."

“Yeah, you’ve had it rough.”

“I hate Labyrinth City. It’s humid and smelly. My village is way better!”

“I don’t know anything about your village, but yeah, I can’t deny that this place sucks,” Nick said with a wry smile before taking another bite of the grilled octolegs.

“But...,” Karan began. She looked up at the bright sun. “I feel like I could come to like it a little more.”

“...Good luck with that,” Nick said after finishing the grilled octolegs.

“The food is good, at least.”

“Yeah, you should treat yourself to all the food you want.” Nick thought once again that it was good they stood their ground in Goblin Forest. “Anyway, is there anything else you want?”

“A job with a high-paying salary. I want to be rich.”

“Everyone wants that... Isn’t there something more tangible you’d like to have?”

Karan cocked her head and thought. After a moment, she frowned, seeming to come to a realization. “I really don’t care about the pendant,” she said sullenly.

“...R-really?” Nick responded, unable to tell how she really felt.

“Yeah. So just act normally. Work hard at telling us what to do in labyrinths and what monsters we are going to fight. That’ll make me happy.”

“Got it. I’ll do just that.” Nick was currently the one in charge of planning labyrinth explorations for the party. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that whether they made money was resting on Nick’s shoulders. “I want you to think of something, though. I told you not to trust me.”

Karan responded with a mixed expression. “You’re weird, Nick.”

“Weird? How?”

“Most people wouldn’t say that.”

“That’s not...”

Nick started to argue, but then he thought about it. The leaders of adventurer parties generally fell into two types: those who told everyone to follow them with a hearty guffaw, and those who bluffed in an attempt to maintain everyone’s trust. No leader wanted their party members to doubt their decisions or skill, and any party members who did would give up on their leader and leave the party. The Survivors were very unusual.

Nick was able to accept what Karan said after looking at his situation objectively. “They wouldn’t, would they?”

“Nope.”

Nick and Karan both laughed. He was the one who put this

strange party together, but Karan only had herself to blame for choosing to join.

“We should steadily increase the difficulty of the labyrinths we take on. When we get to D rank, we’ll be able to make a good amount of money. You’ll be able to afford three-star restaurants, no problem,” Nick said.

“And you’ll be able to throw a mountain of gold at your favorite idol,” Karan responded.

“A whole mountain would kill her, silly.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I guess so.”

Karan laughed cheerfully. Her smile was as radiant as the sun—she couldn’t look any more different than when they first met. This was probably the real Karan.

A Request from the Guild



The cold weather was bone-chilling. The cave was below freezing, with much cleaner air than one would expect this deep underground. The ruler of this place unfit for human habitation was a giant devil with blue skin. It was called a rakshasa.

The rakshasa attacked the Survivors with the intent to kill, scattering cold air as it did so.

“Shaaah!”

The rakshasa focused mana into its hands and created an uneven block of ice the size of a boulder, which shot toward the party like a bullet. This spell was called Ice Bullet, and unlike Tiana’s Icicle Dance, it packed a massive amount of power into one blow.

Unfazed by the powerful long-distance attack, the Survivors took position to defend themselves.

“*Ice Shield!*”

Tiana formed a shield of ice as she moved into position, and the rest of the party quickly took cover behind it. The shield blocked the ice bullet, causing it to break apart into ice shards that scattered in all directions. Ice Shield protected the party from the shards as well.

“Grrrrr!” the rakshasa growled threateningly, angry that its deadly spell was blocked. That was a mistake—it should have wasted no time moving on to its next attack. Nick and Karan took advantage of that and disappeared from its sight.

“BWAH?!”

Nick attacked from the right, and Karan from the left. Nick threw knives while hiding in its blind spots, aiming accurately for its eyes, throat, and heart. Monsters’ bodies were made of miasma and didn’t always have the same weak points as humans, but a blade could still mortally wound them. The rakshasa deflected the knives with sharp claws, but that gave Karan the opportunity she needed.

“Take this... *Fire Dragon Slash!*”

The icicles on the walls and ceiling reflected a streak of flames.

“GRRAAAAAGH?!”

The rakshasa screamed in agony as Karan slayed it with her blade.

“All right, the boss is down. Good job, Karan,” Nick called.

“That was nothing!” Karan replied happily.

The Survivors had just finished their trek through a new labyrinth. It was called Rakshasa Ice Cavern and was designated for intermediate adventurers from F to D rank. The party had been using it as their hunting ground as of late. As the name implied, it was a cavern that remained as cold as winter even in the summertime. It had about the same number of monsters as Goblin Forest, but they had adapted to the cold environment and didn’t venture into the warm outdoors. As such, keeping the monsters under control wasn’t as big of a concern as it was with Goblin Forest.

The most common monsters in the cavern were ice hobgoblins and ice wolves. Ice hobgoblins were a subspecies of hobgoblin. Just like hobgoblins, they looked like goblins with horns—and were faster and stronger than goblins as well. They had adapted to living in cold environments without difficulty. They had no other special characteristics, meaning they weren’t difficult to deal with.

Ice wolves were ice-type wolf monsters that released frigid air when they howl. Their ability to attack from long distances and their agility at close range as they tried to bite you make them a challenge for adventurers of lower rank. They did have weaknesses though—their frigid air was easy to defend against with defensive spells, and they were surprisingly fragile when hit with fire spells. If you had a vanguard to hold off the ice hobgoblins and a rear guard to take out the ice wolves, Rakshasa Ice Cavern wasn’t difficult.

“Is something wrong, Nick? Let’s start collecting,” Karan asked.

The boss of the labyrinth was the rakshasa they just killed, a type of devil. Its strength was about the same as an ogre. What set it apart was its blue skin, its agility, and its ability to use ice-elemental magic. It also didn’t command a pack of weaker monsters like ogres did, making it not much of a challenge for the Survivors if they worked together. Karan had actually killed it in only one attack.

“No, I just had something on my mind,” Nick responded.

“Don’t just say that. Is it something important?” Tiana asked.

“This is the third labyrinth we’ve conquered. Goopy Waterworks was first and then Goblin Forest. And now this one.”

“Yep.”

“We decided to make this place our hunting ground in the process. What do you think of it?”

“Hmm... I guess it’s not as hard as I expected. It’s a pain because it’s far and a lot of work, but there’s nothing that feels especially life-threatening,” Tiana answered with her hand on her chin. She was

aware that part of what she said was worrying, and so she shared her misgiving. “Honestly, I can feel myself getting careless.”

“That’s what I was worried about.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“I don’t think it’s carelessness you’re feeling. It’s fatigue. No matter how easy a labyrinth is, all the walking is bound to make us tired. Getting tired causes your concentration to waver, which means you’ll inevitably make mistakes,” Nick explained.

“Healing magic can heal injuries, but the only cure for fatigue is rest,” Zem said solemnly.

“We all got a role to fill and little room to mess up. Our lack of backups means if one of us gets incapacitated, we’re all in trouble. There’s not a whole lotta risk in places of this difficulty, but if we took on a labyrinth two or three ranks higher, one mistake could mean death.”

“Then should we add another person?” Karan asked nervously.

Nick shook his head to put her at ease. “Don’t worry; we won’t do that. We couldn’t if we wanted to. It’d only cause trouble if we brought in someone who doesn’t share our values.”

The other three nodded in silent agreement. All the members of the Survivors carried pain from an event in their past. None of them wanted to adventure with someone who didn’t understand that pain. They weren’t going to budge on that.

“Guess we gotta make sure not to push ourselves too hard,” Nick said.

“Yeah...,” Tiana agreed.

The Survivors returned to the guild to sell the materials they collected.

“Are you all used to Fishermen yet?”

“Hoo-hoo, you’re rakin’ it in. Where’d you guys go?”

Instead of Newbies, they went to a guild called the Fishermen Adventurers Guild, which was meant for adventurers who had moved beyond G rank—no longer beginners but not yet intermediate. There were fewer amateurs than there were at Newbies, and there were no veterans hanging around like sheep in wolf’s clothing. In a way, this guild embodied the spirit of adventurers more than any other, and it was the most active in Labyrinth City in terms of pure numbers.

It was busy from morning to night with collection requests, monster hunts with bounties attached, requests for adventurer assistance, and more. There were so many people that the lobby, which had a capacity of well over one hundred, felt cramped. The adventurers shared information enthusiastically, and they were always friendly toward the Survivors despite how new they were to the guild.

“Rakshasa Ice Caverns,” Nick answered.

“Really? With just four people? You guys are good.”

“Thanks. We need to sell our materials, so see ya later.”

The four of them cut through the crowd toward reception.

“Okay, I’ve got fifty-three ice hobgoblin horns, three rakshasa horns, and thirty-six teeth. That comes to...,” the guild employee said as she counted the spoils Nick gave her and calculated the reward using an abacus. She then gave them the reward in gold and silver coins in neat stacks of ten.

Nick collected the reward while fighting back a smile. Just as he was about to suggest they split up the money so he could go spend it on something fun, the receptionist stopped them.

“Oh, please wait a moment, Nick. There is a matter we would like to discuss with you. Could you all please come to the back?” she asked.

“Huh?”

Nick and his companions were guided into a small conference room in the back of the guild.

“Hey, Nick. Does this kind of thing happen often?” Tiana asked.

“No, F-rank adventurers don’t usually get summoned like this,” Nick responded. He didn’t have a good answer for her. They waited in the conference room for a few minutes, unsure of what was going on.

“Sorry to make you wait, Survivors.”

“Oh, it’s the old hag. What’re you doin’ here?” Nick asked.

“Call me by my name, boy. I technically work for headquarters, so I can visit any branch. I’m normally at Newbies, though.”

It was Vilma, the employee they’d talked to at Newbies.

“Nick, you should not insult people like that,” Zem chided.

“All right, all right,” Nick replied.

“Good to see I can count on the former priest to know proper manners. Anyway, we’re here to talk work. Sit down,” Vilma said.

Nick sat down reluctantly. “...So what business do you have with an F-rank party?”

“I have a labyrinth I want you to explore. It’s called the Labyrinth of Bonds.”

“Huh?!” Nick was shocked. “The Labyrinth of Bonds... Isn’t that sealed off?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Then why’re you trying to send us there?”

“It hasn’t been explored in a long time, so I want you all to perform an investigation for me.”

“Sounds like a pain in the ass...”

“What’s the Labyrinth of Bonds? I’ve never heard of it,” Tiana asked.

“Put simply, it’s a labyrinth used for training,” Nick answered.

“Training? Is it like Goblin Forest, then?”

“No, that’s a normal labyrinth with miasma and monsters that new adventurers and the guild simply chose as a training ground. There’s no miasma in the Labyrinth of Bonds.”

“Wouldn’t no miasma mean no monsters?”

“Well...” Nick trailed off.

Vilma picked up the slack. “The labyrinth was designed to produce golems—dolls that resemble monsters.”

“What are you talking about? That sounds like something only an ancient artifact could do,” Tiana said dubiously. Vilma raised her index finger as if to confirm what she said.

“That’s right; it’s an ancient artifact.”

Artifacts were relics of an ancient civilization; they differed from the magic items of modern day. Compared to the magic items circulating today, artifacts had otherworldly powers and functions, but there weren’t many of them, and they consumed a lot of mana. One small box-size artifact would sell for enough money to build a mansion.

“The labyrinth itself automatically generates golems and maintains the difficulty level and environment without human supervision. It’s one of the hidden treasures of Labyrinth City,” Vilma continued.

“That’s incredible... Why don’t more people know about it?” Tiana remarked in wonder. Nick crossed his arms and made a troubled expression.

“The place is unpopular with adventurers ’cause killing the golems doesn’t get you any sellable items. You’re better off going to a normal labyrinth where you can make some money.”

“Sounds like a waste of time,” Karan agreed.

“The old me might have sneered at that sentiment, but now I know how adventurers feel,” Tiana admitted.

“It lacks even the just cause of killing monsters and clearing miasma,” Zem commented.

All four of them reacted with disinterest. This was exactly how the Labyrinth of Bonds came to be neglected by adventurers and sealed off.

“I can’t deny any of that. It’s sealed off because adventurers wouldn’t come if we opened it, and we don’t want non-adventurers wandering inside,” Vilma responded as if bored.

“What do you want to open it for, then?” Nick asked.

“We have reason to believe there is undiscovered treasure in there. An employee who was sorting knowledge orbs found a catalog of treasures from the Labyrinth of Bonds. There were plenty of

treasures on the list that have yet to be found,” she explained.

Knowledge orbs were crystal balls containing documents. They could hold information equivalent to hundreds of books, which could be perused by peering into the crystal ball. They were valuable enough to sell for as much as the very finest weapons.

That was far from the most enticing thing Vilma said, however.

“Treasure?!” Karan squawked, taking the bait.

“Are you interested, Karan?” Nick asked.

“Y-yeah... Is that weird?”

Karan noticed she had half jumped out of her chair and sat back down looking embarrassed.

“No, that’s nothin’ to be ashamed about.”

“Th-that was childish.”

“All adventurers are just overgrown kids. So what kinda treasure are we talking?”

“There’s a magic measurement mirror, a communication orb, a flame talisman...” Vilma counted off with her fingers.

Nick didn’t look impressed. “Those don’t sound any different from the magic items that’re mass-produced today,” he interjected.

“Hold your horses. This last one is the most important...a holy sword called the Sword of Bonds.”

They all tilted their heads in confusion. The name of the sword didn’t excite anyone.

“What’s a holy sword? Do you know, Tiana?” Nick asked.

“I’ve heard that swords bestowed with a spell are called magic swords, and the very best ones are called holy swords. I’ve never heard of the Sword of Bonds, though,” she answered. Karan and Zem both shook their heads to show they didn’t know what it was, either. Vilma smirked.

“There’s a reason you’ve never heard of it—it’s a legendary artifact found only in the Labyrinth of Bonds. It is a holy sword that gains power by combining and amplifying the strength of a group of people bound by trust. There could be no better weapon for an adventurer’s party.”

“Hmm,” Nick responded with a bored sigh.

“What, does that not interest you?” Vilma asked.

“Turning trust and bonds into power? Sounds like a fairy tale.”

The Survivors knew well just how fleeting trust could be. They all looked equally disinterested by the old woman’s words.

“Geez, you kids are cold... It’s a shame. Your party is perfect for this job,” Vilma lamented.

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“Nick. Have you ever been to the Labyrinth of Bonds?”

“No.”

“Why is that?”

“There was no one in Combat Masters who could use magic. We knew the lower floors were a pain if you didn’t have a mage or a priest, and you don’t get any valuable materials, either. We had no reason to go.”

“Exactly. Look at your current party, though—it’s split well between vanguard and rear guard. The Labyrinth of Bonds was actually constructed to encourage that ideal party balance.”

“I don’t give a crap about the labyrinth’s construction. Is that why you chose us? ’Cause we got a good party composition?”

“Honestly, it’s not just you. We’ve already sent a few parties in, and some have made it to the bottom floor. They’ve found a number of mass-produced artifacts. But what we’re really after—the Sword of Bonds—has yet to be found.”

“If it’s not on the bottom floor, what makes you think it’s there at all?”

Vilma was undeterred by Nick’s indifference. “It’s too early to give up. Most labyrinths created with ancient artifacts have some kind of hidden floor. You’ll be paid handsomely if you find it,” she said, laying out her proposal.

“What if we find nothing? Do we get no reward?” Nick asked.

“You will receive a flat sum. Just venturing into the labyrinth will get you thirty thousand dina.”

Nick didn’t love the sound of that. That was 7,500 dina for each of them. That was a pretty good amount for an F-rank party, but they could make much more money going to Rakshasa Ice Cavern. It would be a different story if they found the treasure, though. Knowing this would require careful consideration, Nick looked at each of his comrades.

“So how do you feel about it?”

“Hmm... That depends on travel time and how many days the exploration will take. Is it close?” Tiana asked.

“It’s right around the corner. The entrance is located within the Adventurers Guild headquarters, making it a thirty-minute walk from here. It takes about three hours to reach the final floor. If you spend a whole workday in there and reach the bottom floor, we won’t skimp on the reward,” Vilma answered.

“Oh, it makes sense that a training labyrinth would be inside... This doesn’t sound so bad to me,” Tiana said, and Karan and Zem nodded their agreement. Seeing that, Nick faced Vilma.

“Okay,” he began.

“Have you changed your mind?” Vilma asked.

“Not quite. I have more conditions. Promise us you won’t reduce the reward by trying to say we found the wrong holy sword or that it’s

in bad condition. I want our agreement to be as clear as possible.”

“You really do have trust issues. You missed your life’s calling as a merchant.”

“Shut up. No adventurer would trust such loose terms.”

Vilma sighed at Nick’s attitude. In the end, however, they agreed on certain terms. Nick made sure she gave them a map, informed them of the enemies, and shared the locations that had been searched before and the ones that needed another look. He asked her to describe the holy sword and promise to give the same reward regardless of its condition. He also asked if the guild would purchase any other items they excavated. Even Vilma, who was used to dealing with annoying adventurers, was at the end of her rope by the time Nick was done extracting information from her.

“This isn’t a bad job,” Nick said, and the others agreed with him. “All right, we accept.”

“I’d be livid if you rejected the job after all those questions. Get a move on,” Vilma urged, shoos them out of the room.

Thus, the Survivors agreed to take on the Labyrinth of Bonds.

The Search for the Holy Sword



“So this is the Labyrinth of Bonds... It really does look more like an ancient ruin than a labyrinth,” Tiana muttered with fascination as they passed through the entrance to the Labyrinth of Bonds and stepped onto its stone pavement.

The square cobblestones were arranged to an obsessive perfection, without a single chip or scratch in sight. No modern stonemasons or carpenters were capable of building something like this. It wasn’t just the pavement—there were doors that opened automatically upon sensing people, candlesticks that lit on their own, and more feats of technology that could only have been accomplished by the ancient civilization.

“I had heard about this place, but it’s seriously bizarre... I’ve never explored anything like it. That old lady gave us a good amount of information, but I’m gonna be fumblin’ in the dark here. Sorry,” Nick apologized.

“That’s what labyrinth exploration is all about, no? I am also ignorant of ancient ruins, but I will do my best,” Zem replied.

“Yeah, this kind of job really makes you feel like an adventurer,” Karan said, also trying to cheer up Nick.

“Yeah, I guess so. Well, we have a map and data on the monsters—er, golems. We should be fine as long as we’re careful.”

The four of them got moving. They walked down the hallway and quickly ended up in a spacious room. There was something awaiting their arrival.

“GUUUURRRRR...”

“...That must be a golem,” Nick said.

“It looks...artificial,” Zem observed.

Huge wooden building blocks piled into a human shape. It was a golem produced by the Labyrinth of Bonds.

“This is the wooden golem that appears on the first floor, just like our papers say. You’re up, Karan,” Nick commanded.

“Okay.” Karan stepped forward, took a deep breath, and blew it out.

“GRAAAAAH?!”

Karan’s fire breath engulfed the wooden golem, and it screamed as it burned.

“Man, look at it burn... It’s made of wood, after all,” Nick murmured.

The battle was over after just one breath from Karan. The golems on the higher floors were only slightly stronger than goblins, and they were no match for the Survivors.

“That’s one down,” Karan said, satisfied. Nick nodded.

“All right, let’s keep going.”

They encountered nothing but wooden golems from the first to the third floor down. On each successive floor, another golem was added, but Karan burned them all without issue. The party finally found something new on the fourth floor belowground.

“GUUUOOOOH...!”

“These golems appear to be made of bronze. According to our information, these metal golems are on the middle floors,” Zem said.

“Would it be wrong to take these home with us?” Tiana muttered, staring at the golems.

Their shining bodies were rust-free and would surely sell for a lot of money to the dwarves, who enjoyed casting and carving.

“I wish we could, but that is impossible. The doors will not open if you try to take them out of the labyrinth. There is some kind of... secure system that prevents it. The labyrinth also restores all the golems you have defeated to life and creates new ones. It apparently does not want people using them as materials...,” Zem explained.

“What a bunch of cheapskates...,” Tiana remarked. “Though, I guess this place would be ruined if the golems were stolen.”

“The people who built it must have been quite prudent. We could all learn from them.”

“For real.”

The vanguard had their hands full as Tiana and Zem conversed.

“GRAAAH!”

One of the bronze golems raised its arms high and began to spin them around. The weight and centrifugal force of its arms created a tremendous force that could have easily knocked an ogre off its feet.

“Hmph.” Karan used her Dragonbone Sword as a shield, blocking the blow despite its strength. She didn’t even flinch—instead, it was the golem that staggered backward.

“Take this!” Nick yelled, rushing at the staggering bronze golem. His dagger wasn’t particularly useful against the golem’s sturdy body.

“GUUROOH?!”

Fortunately, Nick was skilled enough to make it work. Unlike humans, the bodies of golems were made up of individual pieces put together. There was a gap between each part, and Nick aimed for those as he slashed with his dagger. He didn't inflict any lethal damage, but his attacks caused just enough that the golem couldn't ignore him. It swung its arms to try to knock him away.

“Now, Karan!”

Nick was too fast for the lumbering golem, and it couldn't make contact. Whenever it turned around and tried to hit him, Nick would dodge and slice at it from a different angle, steadily wearing it down. Once the golem became so absorbed in trying to shake him off that it left itself defenseless, Karan pounced.

“Hi-yaaaah!”

“GUUGWAAAH?!”

She cut off the bronze golem's head with her Dragonbone Sword. “That's one down!” she exclaimed.

“Countin' on you for the other one, too!” Nick yelled back, striking the other golem's knee with his dagger. He wasn't trying to slash the golem—he used its center of gravity and construction against it to knock it over.

“Hyah!” Karan swung her greatsword down on the fallen golem. Its body spasmed before falling still.

“...I'm the only one who's not doing anything.” Tiana sighed, sounding bored.

Karan was unable to melt the metal golems with her fire breath, and because wind and cold air were also ineffective, Tiana's magic wasn't helpful for killing them, either. As such, their strategy for the middle floors consisted of Zem using support magic to strengthen the vanguard, Nick confusing the golems, and Karan finishing them off. Their teamwork, unperfected in Goblin Forest, was working without a hitch now.

“I have nothing to do, either, once the fighting begins,” Zem said.

“You're using magic, though. Eh, whatever. At least I don't have to break a sweat.”

Nick turned to the bored Tiana. “The lower floors are apparently the real challenge. You'll have more work than you could ever want before long.”

“That's true.”

“Make sure to keep yourself ready. Karan, are you hurt? Have some water.”

“No, I'm fine.”

Karan accepted a flask from Nick and drank. They had seemed to grow closer since their successful venture into Goblin Forest. Karan

was readily listening to Nick's orders, and he was clearly looking out for her.

Zem and Tiana looked at them with a twinkle in their eyes.

"You two are starting to look like siblings," Tiana teased.

"H-huh," Nick stammered in response.

Karan was a dragonian and physically mature for her age. Humans and dragonians had about the same life span, but dragonians reached adulthood faster. Anyone who didn't know that would probably think Karan was older than Nick.

"What? Does that bother you?" Karan asked.

"No, it's not that. I just wish I was a little bigger so I could be more helpful in combat," Nick responded with a sigh, sitting down on the floor.

"I think you are skilled enough, Nick. Look at me—I am tall but lack physical strength," Zem responded encouragingly.

"And if you got hurt or killed fighting, we'll be the ones in big trouble without you, Nick," Karan said. "I didn't think of any of the things you did when we took this job. If we didn't have you, we wouldn't have learned nearly as much about the labyrinth's layout, its monsters, or anything else. I would almost rather you stayed back during battle to keep safe."

"That's... Yeah. Karan's absolutely right," Tiana agreed.

Nick had become the pillar of the group. Tiana, Zem, and Karan were all fully aware of how important he was to their success with their jobs and labyrinth expeditions.

"Huh... I think there are plenty of scouts as good as me, though. My research hasn't been perfect, either—there was only supposed to be one bronze golem just now, but there were two," Nick argued.

"You can't blame yourself for that. The number of monsters is always going to vary," Tiana said.

"Most scouts can't take on an ogre alone like you did. Also..." Karan trailed off.

"Hmm? What?" Nick asked, urging her to continue.

Karan just reddened and mumbled in response. "...No, it's nothing."

"What were you gonna say?"

"I said it's nothing." Karan looked away and chugged the rest of her water.

"All right, that's enough chatter. We should get moving," Tiana urged.

"Y-yeah," Nick responded. The question still lingered in his head, but he stood up. "Let's finish this job."

The Labyrinth of Bonds was constructed for training purposes. The

upper floors—the first floor down to the third floor belowground—used wooden golems to test whether the party could actually fight. The fourth floor down to the sixth floor tested the strength of the vanguard by using bronze golems that were resistant to magic but could be defeated with physical attacks.

The character of the labyrinth changed completely from the seventh down to the tenth floor. This section was designed to test the cumulative strength of the entire party. The warriors and the mages—the vanguard and the rear guard—had to prove that they could fight together. This posed no challenge to a party that had already developed the needed chemistry.

“SHAAAAH!”

A heavy and sharp arm descended toward Karan, but she blocked it with her Dragonbone Sword.

“Gh...!”

The crystal golems were totally different from the golems they had fought up to this point. Their special bodies mitigated physical attacks to the extent that Karan’s greatsword bounced right off of them. She was forced to focus entirely on defense, which was a situation she didn’t find herself in often. However, she had to hold her ground to keep Tiana and Zem out of danger. She needed to buy them time.

“I’m ready! Run, Karan!” Tiana commanded.

“Okay!” Karan yelled back.

“*Wind Blade!*”

Tiana fired thin blades of air from her staff toward the crystal golem.

“GUUUUGAAH!”

The blades mercilessly cut its beautiful crystalline body to pieces. Crystal golems were resistant to physical attacks but surprisingly brittle in defense to magic.

“Help me out here, Tiana!” Nick shouted.

“Make sure to dodge! *Ice Spear!*”

Nick was distracting one of the crystal golems, just like Karan was. Unlike her, he was using his agility to dodge its attacks and confuse it. Tiana’s thick spear of ice passed over Nick’s head and pierced the golem.

“GOOOAAAAH?!”

It then thudded to the ground. Tiana made killing them look as easy as taking candy from a baby.

“Sweet!” Tiana celebrated joyfully. She was now used to attacking enemies with spells from the back while keeping track of the vanguard’s constant movement. Previously, she had only cast spells as surprise attacks before Nick and Karan engaged the enemy, but now she could watch the two of them and attack monsters with perfect

timing. She became just as capable as any intermediate mage in battle, and her arsenal of spells was already on the level of advanced adventurers before her first day on the job.

"You appear to be fine, Nick. Let's see... I will heal you, Karan," Zem said.

"Okay," Karan responded. There were scratches on her arms—the crystal golem had grazed her more than once.

"Recovery."

Zem had achieved similar growth with his decision-making in regard to healing magic. He was able to appropriately determine the burden the vanguard was under at all times and efficiently use healing magic to keep them in perfect shape. He didn't have to expend much mana, either. If he made the wrong decision and either used too much healing magic or held back and didn't treat an injury to Nick or Karan, it would hurt the party down the line. Fortunately, he had become a good judge of when to heal what he could with medicine or herbs and when to use spells. He had also grown comfortable hanging back and watching the battle unfold without needlessly joining in with his mace.

"We are making fast progress," Zem commented.

"I would say 'Don't let your guard down,' but this place *was* made for beginners," Nick said.

"Honestly, I'm kind of bored," Karan admitted.

"I'm not complaining. It's not every day you get paid for such a safe and easy job," Tiana argued.

"You're right about that...", Nick agreed wholeheartedly. "Right now we just need to focus on earning a steady income. I want to spend my money freely, but I also want enough to put away for savings."

"The world is truly unfair... I am scared of how much I would spend if I allowed myself to indulge in my hobbies," Zem said.

"We're all careless with money...", Tiana muttered.

They all made guilty expressions. They were each aware of their bad habits.

"A-anyway, let's do our job. We'll worry about how we use the money later," Nick said to move them along, and they cautiously resumed their expedition.

They knew where all the downward staircases were thanks to their complete map, but Nick went out of his way to investigate every dead end. Exploration was their purpose, so they needed to check out areas that most adventurers would ignore.

"Hmm? That's strange...", Nick muttered.

"Is something wrong, Nick?" Karan asked.

"No, it's just that the lamp over there is a different color from the

rest.” Nick had abruptly stopped before the wall of a dead end. The area was dimly illuminated by a green lamp high on the wall. “Doesn’t it say on the map that the lamps are red?”

“I’ll check,” Tiana said before taking out the map. The ground then shook slightly.

“What the...?”

Soon after, the wall—or what was actually an automatic door—slid aside to reveal a passageway.

“Is this on the map?” Nick asked, and Tiana shook her head.

“No, it only shows a wall here. There’s no indication of a trap, a treasure chest, or anything... It does say that someone noticed the green lamp and investigated, but they didn’t find anything.”

“So this directly contradicts the information we were given... That’d be understandable if this was a regular labyrinth, but this was man-made. Mistakes shouldn’t happen.”

“What should we do?” Karan asked.

Nick thought about it. He didn’t feel like the Adventurers Guild intentionally lied to them. It was more likely that the discrepancy was an error resulting from a shortage of qualified personnel. “Hmm... Well, we don’t have much choice but to check it out. We’ll need to include this in the report.”

Unbeknownst to the party, someone was watching them. Actually, *someone* wasn’t quite right—it was not a biological being. It may not have had eyes to see, but it was certainly observing the four of them with an intense longing.

“Looks like I successfully deactivated security... I pray they can make it here...”

No one was there to hear its voice.

The Guidance of the Holy Sword



The passageway itself didn't look much different from the rest of the labyrinth. That was about the only thing that remained the same.

"What the hell is with this place?! This is way more difficult than the main route!" Nick yelled.

Multiple bronze golems about two heads smaller than the average human charged at him together. He swung his dagger in all directions and kicked as hard as he could with his metal-plated shoes as he dodged their attacks. It was essential that he prevented them from reaching Tiana.

"Fortify sure is useful...", he said.

"Please don't overestimate it!" Zem called.

Nick was fighting in a manner that normally would have gotten him hurt if he hadn't been strengthened by Zem's support magic. The former priest was even participating in the fight with his mace because of the great number of golems.

"I know, I know!"

Nick picked up a downed bronze golem by the leg and swung it around as a club to attack the other golems. Such a feat wouldn't have been possible without Zem's Invigorate spell. Until now, he had fought carefully even when strengthened by Zem's support magic, but he was starting to get a firm grasp of what exactly his body was capable of under these spells. This show of brute strength might have looked reckless, but it wasn't.

Nick began to overwhelm the bronze golems, but they weren't the only enemies.

"Watch out, Nick!" Karan shouted.

"I see it!" he responded.

An arm as hard as iron—literally—swung down at Nick. It belonged to an iron golem, which was made of exactly what you'd expect. One hit from it would result in a serious injury. Karan watched him anxiously as he dodged under the powerful arm.

"My spell is ready! Move!" Tiana commanded.

"Got it!"

"Radial Lightning!"

A flash of light surged from Tiana's staff. It was a lightning-elemental spell that sent electricity out in a radial pattern before the caster to attack enemies. Metal golems were resistant to magic, but there were certain spells they were vulnerable to. Radial Lightning wouldn't end the battle all at once, but it at least stopped these enemies from moving temporarily. That was very useful in a group battle.

"GUUII?!"

"Now's our chance! Take 'em down!" Nick yelled. He began to kick the bronze golems before him, and Karan leaped toward the stunned iron golem.

"Fire Dragon Slash!"

She sent the golem's head flying with a brilliant stroke of her blade, continuing her swing until her searing hot Dragonbone Sword cut through the bronze golems around her like butter. Finally, all the golems had stopped moving.

"You are covered in abrasions, Nick." Zem chanted a healing spell, and the scratches disappeared.

"Thanks."

"The difficulty shot up quickly. I swear that iron golem was stronger than the ogre and the rakshasa." Tiana sighed with fatigue. She gulped down water from a flask.

"You're not wrong. It was seriously tough. This floor is really complicated, too... God dammit, mapping is annoying." Nick put his hand to his chin and thought. They might find themselves in danger if the enemies kept getting harder. That would require more sufficient preparation and strategizing. "We should consider retreating as an option."

"That would be wise," Zem agreed.

"How do you two feel?" Nick asked Tiana and Karan.

"Hmm... It would be a shame to leave empty-handed after finding unexplored ground," Tiana answered.

"That's true...", Nick said. He had never done anything exciting and special as an adventurer. He was enticed by the prospect of exploring where no one had before.

"Should we look at the next floor, at least?" Karan suggested.

"Do you wanna keep going, Karan?" Nick asked.

"Yeah."

"All right, we'll take a peek at the next floor. If it's not the end, we'll return and ask Vilma to give us an extension on our search."

So they ventured deeper into the labyrinth.

“What is this place...?”

The next room looked completely different from any they had encountered so far. It was so spacious that it seemed to continue forever, with a smooth, glossy floor that stood in stark contrast to the square tiles on the floor and walls of the rest of the labyrinth. There was no sign of the golems they’d encountered on the previous floor.

There was something in the center of the room.

“Is that the hilt of a sword?” Nick said aloud.

“There’s no blade. That’s weird,” Karan commented.

The hilt was resting on a platform. It had a long grip big enough for two hands, and an elaborate guard with a mystical appearance. But whatever purpose that served, a sword was pointless without a blade. Despite that, the way it was enshrined on the decorated platform seemed to suggest it was complete.

“...Is that a magic sword?” Tiana said.

“Even if it is, what good would it be without a blade?” Nick responded.

“I’ve heard of magic swords that create the blade from the user’s mana. This could be one of those.”

“Oh, I see.” Nick carefully approached the sword. “I don’t see any traps... Doubt I could do anything about traps in an ancient ruin, though.”

“Should we take it back with us?” Tiana asked.

“As long as nothing happens when we try. Do you sense any weird mana coming from it, Tiana?”

“Not at the moment... I don’t feel anything from the sword or its surroundings.”

“Got it.”

Taking care and avoiding touching it with his bare hands, he grabbed the sword’s guard with a cloth.

“H-how dare you pick up a sword in such a manner? At least hold me by the handle, knave.”

A strange voice reverberated in Nick’s ears. The age and gender of the voice were indiscernible. “...What was that? Did someone say something?”

“Be careful, Nick! The magic sword just activated!” Tiana shouted.

“You mean this?!” Nick dropped it immediately and backed away. The handle clanked to the ground. They all readied their weapons to prepare for the worst.

“And then you drop me, you oaf! Do you have any idea what I am?!”

“How could I?! Oh wait, are you...the Sword of Bonds?” Nick asked.

The sword answered with a haughty voice, and Nick could almost hear laughter.

“Why, yes. I am the greatest masterpiece the Teran Magic Weapons Factory ever

produced, an angelic spiritual weapon called the Sword of Bonds. Only the worthy may touch me."

"Well, I'm definitely not touching you with my bare hands now. I'll be sure not to drop you, so behave yourself," Nick said. He pulled a cloth out of his knapsack and began to wrap it up.

Karan and Zem looked at it uncomfortably.

"Um, Nick. That sword is talking. Does that not surprise you?" the former priest asked.

"Y-yeah. It's creepy," the dragonian added.

"Creepy?!"

"I-it's yelling at me!"

"Calm down, you two. I heard about talking swords from my instructor. They exist," Nick said.

Zem and Karan both looked surprised.

"They do?" Zem asked.

"Yeah. He said there are a bunch of different types of intelligent swords. You could probably consider them sword golems."

"That's right. I've even heard there was a sword in another country that was given peerage for its accomplishments in the war," Tiana supplemented.

"You two know everything..." Karan said with some astonishment.

"In any case," Nick began, examining the sword. "If it's an intelligent sword, we've got nothing to worry about. It won't be cursed."

"How do you know that?" Karan asked.

"The ancient civilization apparently had certain restrictions when it came to making items with intelligence or with a soul. They had to be unable to disobey their owner, and they couldn't be imbued with brainwashing spells or anything else they could use to control someone. That means you don't have to be on guard around it," he explained. The Sword of Bonds laughed boastfully.

"The boy is right. Do not associate me with vulgar magic items made to deceive men. I am a proud holy sword that lends strength only to those who appreciate justice and friendship. You should be honored to hold me."

"You got it, Sir Holy Sword. I'll carry you carefully."

"Carry? Are you not a swordsman? It is not every day you obtain a holy sword of my caliber. You should equip me."

"No, I mainly use daggers. I'm more of a light warrior than a swordsman."

"Then... How about you, dragonian girl?"

"I won't use anything other than my Dragonbone Sword."

"Then..." The Sword of Bonds turned its attention to Zem and Tiana, but they both shook their heads. "...Did you not come here seeking me?" it asked doubtfully.

"No, we're here for you," Nick answered.

"Then why are you not rejoicing? You must want to test my power."

“Not really...”

“What else could you want with me? ...Don't tell me.”

“Do we even need to say it?”

Nick looked at his three companions. No objections.

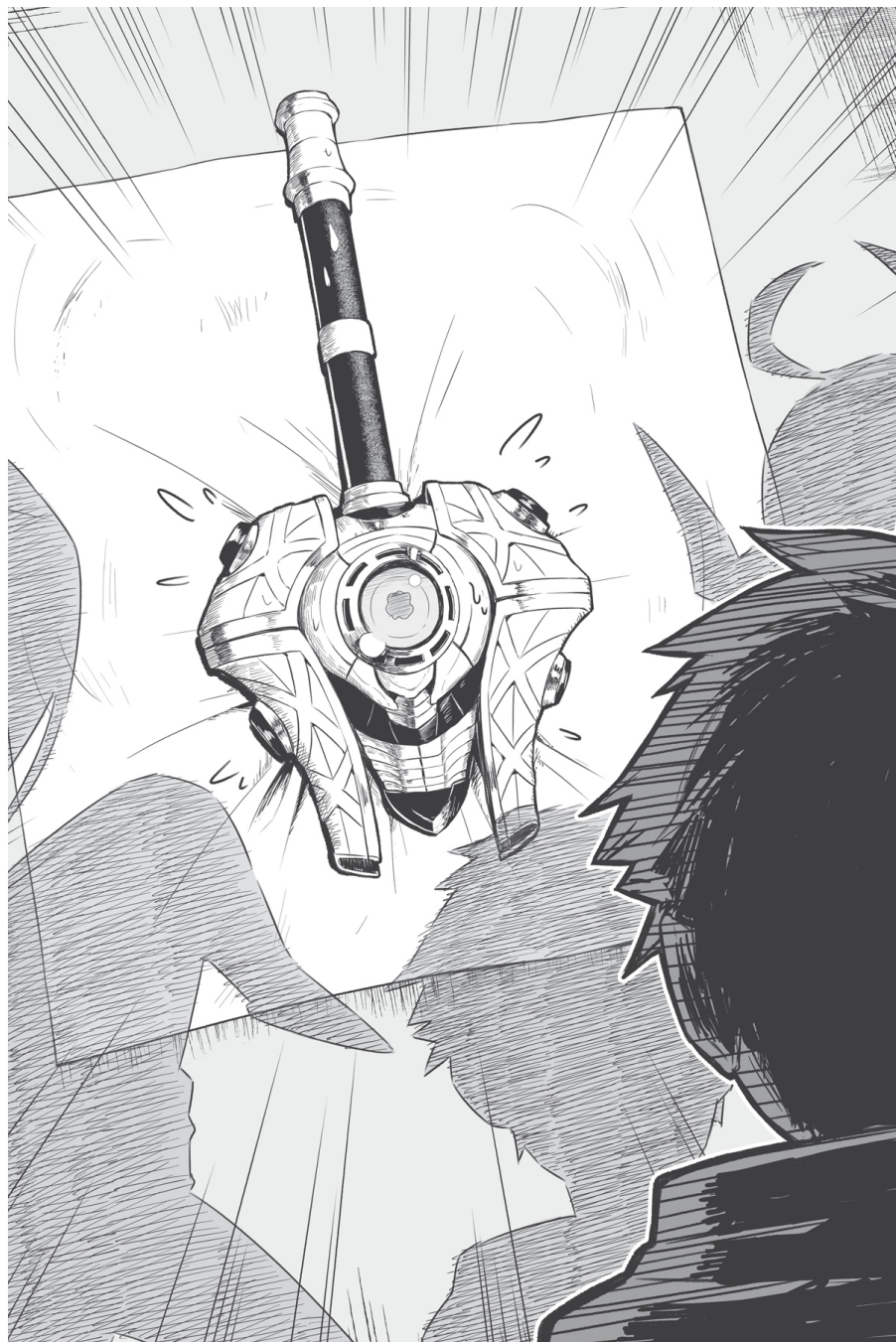
“““““We’re going to sell you.”””””

They answered in unison.

A momentary silence followed. The Survivors all looked confused as to why it would even ask such an obvious question. It was the Sword of Bonds that spoke up first.

“Wh-who are you going to sell me to?! Surely not the government?!”

“The Adventurers Guild,” Nick answered, and the sword grew even angrier.



"No! I refuse to let that happen! I will not finally leave this place just to be sealed or stored again! I am the greatest holy sword in the world! What swordsman would not want to use me?!"

"That sucks for you, but..."

"I waited in slumber for ages without any luck, and now the party the labyrinth finally allowed through intends to SELL me! Oh, fate is cruel!"

"I'm sorry, but we were given a job. We were asked to find the holy sword that might be hidden in this labyrinth."

"I refuse to be handed to those liars in the Adventurers Guild! Do you have any idea how many idle years I have spent down here due to their deception?!"

"I don't know what to tell you..." Nick racked his brain. He couldn't help but feel bad about wrapping it up and silencing it after hearing all that.

"H-hey, Nick. Why don't we at least listen to its story? It said it was lied to and deceived...", Tiana asked timidly. That caused Nick to falter as well. He could no longer think of it as someone else's problem.

"...We don't know the first thing about you. Can you start from the beginning?" he asked the sword.

"Haah... How fickle the human world is. You truly know nothing of the budget that was invested into my development nor of the fuss that occurred when I was completed?"

"Not a clue. That's why I'm asking."

"Must you be so impatient... Fine. I am a holy sword forged for the decisive battle with the grand demon Skiaprelli."

Tiana reacted to those words. "Grand demon Skiaprelli... I've heard that name. The ancient civilization fought multiple wars with the grand demons. I remember learning that Skiaprelli was especially cruel."

"Yes. Skiaprelli was a dreadful, cursed creature."

"Wasn't the demon killed? Or at least sealed?" Nick asked.

"Quite right. The hero of the time, Setsuna the Swift, staged a bold counteroffensive and sealed that cursed creature... I was supposed to participate in the operation as one of the main weapons, but a different holy sword was completed first. I never was able to make my world debut."

"Wow... So they were crankin' holy swords out left and right. The ancient civilization was amazing," Nick said.

"No, they were not 'cranking' us out. The sages at the weapons factory were being worked to death by upper management. The place ran on blood, sweat, and tears. Their work environment was abusive as well."

"Yikes, that's depressing. Don't just drop dark history on us like that."

"That is beside the point. Even if I never made my debut, it is fair to say I am the greatest sword ever made. I gather the strength of my wielder's companions and amplify it. I increase the strength of two people fourfold—and the strength of three people ninefold."

"So you square the strength of a party... That's incredible."

"Indeed, it is...in theory," the Sword of Bonds added quietly.

"In theory?" Karan repeated, looking confused.

"Y-yes. If the companions trust each other to the point that their hearts are one, my power manifests in full. However..."

“Spit it out already,” Nick pressed.

The sword continued as if not thrilled about what it had to say next.

“There were not many capable of activating my power... Even among adventurers with strong chemistry who had worked together for decades, my power could only work on two people. The largest group I was ever able to join together was three. Activating my power with an entire party was a distant dream.”

“What kind of relationship did those three have?”

“...They were triplets.”

“If your power required triplets to function, there’s no way it’d work with a normal party,” Nick said exasperatedly, and the Sword of Bonds rushed to respond.

“Th-that is not true! There must be people bound by true friendship or love who are worthy of me! There must be...” The sword’s voice grew quiet. “After the war ended, I was sealed in this labyrinth for the purpose of finding adventurers fit to wield me. Years passed. I waited and waited, but no one arrived. I suppose I should have known better. The Adventurers Guild only ever intended to use me to attract customers. No one would ever wield me. That was why they sealed the door without telling me or the adventurers.”

“You were a prize that would never be found,” Tiana said.

“...That’s awful,” Nick responded. The four of them couldn’t help but feel sympathy for the sword.

“After a good deal of sulking, I put myself to sleep in order to pass the centuries. I only awoke recently.”

“Recently... Wait, does that mean you were the one who opened that door at the dead end?” Nick asked.

“Correct. I noticed that adventurers were once again stepping foot into this labyrinth. I felt a wash of relief when you all appeared. Which brings me to say...”

“Yeah?”

“Ahem! Young adventurers. You joined hands, overcame hardships, and found the hallway in which I awaited you. That is no small feat. Why don’t we test to see if you are worthy of wielding me? With me, there would be no enemies standing in your path ahead. No matter the opponent, I will grant glorious victory upon you,” the sword proclaimed in a sonorous, theatrical voice.

The Survivors didn’t respond right away. Nick felt the other three pressuring him to say something. Having no choice, he broke the silence. “...Like I said, the whole point of our job was to find you and give you to the Adventurers Guild.”

“I refuse! I am the Sword of Bonds, a holy weapon that can only be wielded by those with righteousness and courage in their hearts! I abhor the thought of a shameful existence as decoration for those who grow fat and hide behind the people who do the real fighting!”

“I don’t know what to say...”

“I—don’t—want—that!”

Nick was unsure of what to do. It was a sword with no means of escape. All it could do was speak. No matter how special of a holy sword it was, it couldn’t oppose its master. Deceiving it and handing it to the Adventurers Guild would be a cinch, but that would feel dirty, and he had no intention of doing it. The other three probably felt the same.

“Hmm... Nick. Is it not true that items found during labyrinth

exploration belong to the adventurers who found them? Surely, it's the adventurers' right to choose not to sell?" Zem inquired.

"No, not in this case. Finding the Sword of Bonds is part of the job we accepted. We'd be in big trouble if they found out we took it without selling it," Nick answered.

"I see..."

"Th-ther must be something you can do!"

"Trust me, I really do want to figure something out..." Nick sighed. That was when it began.

"...Hmm? What's that?" Karan uttered.

"What is it, Karan?" Nick responded.

"The floor is shaking."

"It's shaking? Hey, this place isn't going to cave in, is it?" Nick asked, panicked.

Cave-ins didn't normally occur in labyrinths. He wasn't sure exactly how it worked, but apparently the miasma accumulated in labyrinths prevented disasters like cave-ins and fires and maintained the labyrinth's shape. That meant that monsters never died from natural disasters, but by the same token, adventurers who entered labyrinths didn't have to fear dying in an accident. This labyrinth, however, was man-made. There was no miasma. Nick had no idea if a disaster was imminent.

"Crap, this might be an earthquake," he said.

"There's no way. Ruins are way more durable than modern buildings," Tiana stated.

"Really?"

"The ancient civilization figured out how miasma maintains labyrinths. That knowledge is what has enabled their buildings to remain standing for centuries."

"So what's going on?" Nick asked. The ground shook hard enough for all of them to feel it.

"...Ah."

"What was that Ah for?" Nick glared at the Sword of Bonds suspiciously.

"Th-ther is no need to fear. This is not an earthquake."

"Then what is it?"

"This is the true final floor of the labyrinth. Most adventurers cannot even enter this place."

"Oh yeah, you said you were deceived and sealed."

"Indeed. The managers of the labyrinth sealed the door in secret out of fear that stray adventurers would take me. They then constructed a new part of the labyrinth to fool both adventurers and me into exploring its false depths. I only just succeeded at meddling with security and opening the door... But there is one problem."

"What's that?"

"I was unable to deactivate the guardian set to protect the true final floor... The amount of fiddling that has been performed throughout the labyrinth and the machinery that has been stolen by stray adventurers has made control of the entire facility quite unstable. Control of the

golem bodyguards has become imperfect as well.”

Nick didn’t understand much of what the sword said, but there was one word he caught. “Did you say *guardian*?”

An enormous *thud* sounded that could have been heard from a mile away. The Survivors slowly turned around and saw a golem. Its giant silver body was glossy and beautiful. Unlike the other golems, there were no gaps between its joints, and its liquid metal body shifted constantly as if it had a mind of its own. Its face was blank, but for a brief moment, it looked like a crescent-shaped slit opened where its mouth would be—like a joyful smile.

“That is the strongest foe in this labyrinth: the amalgam golem.”

The Trial of the Holy Sword



“Tch, move back!” Nick ordered as he secured the Sword of Bonds.

They immediately split up to put distance between themselves and the amalgam golem. A second later, the golem struck the ground where they had been standing with an enormous fist, producing a loud boom. Cracks spread on the supposedly sturdy floor.

“Take this! *Icicle Dance!*” Tiana yelled, skewering the golem’s body with icicles.

“*Fire Dragon Slash!*” Karan followed up by initiating her most powerful attack.

“Stop, dragonian girl! That won’t work!” the holy sword warned.

“I can’t sit back and watch!”

Karan’s slash attack split the golem from shoulder to hip... Or at least, that was what it looked like. The Dragonbone Sword undeniably burned its way through the golem’s metal body; the battle should have ended then and there. Her attack was strong enough to cut through steel, and the scorching heat applied to the wound should have prevented the golem from regenerating.

Despite that, its body closed back up like nothing had happened. It was as if time had been rewound. There wasn’t any sign of damage.

“Huh?!” Karan shouted.

Still pierced by the icicles, the amalgam golem roared.

“OOOOOOOH!”

“Something’s off, Karan! Run!” Nick warned, but he was too late.

The amalgam golem shot the icicles back out of its body with tremendous force. Karan used her greatsword as a shield, but a number of them still hit her and sent her flying.

“Gwah?!”

“Karan!”

“The amalgam golem’s body is made from an alloy of purified mercury and nonferrous metals. It is at once hard and soft, which allows it to easily repel long-distance attacks. Its ability to manipulate its body at will also allows it to immediately heal itself when cut. Slashing attacks will accomplish nothing... It might be more accurate to call it an artificial slime than a

golem."

"Mercury... Is it poisonous?!"

"There is no need to worry about that. The golem's body is made of nanomachines—microscopic magic items invisible to the naked eye—that were made so that living bodies cannot absorb them. Their safety was confirmed with testing by qualified researchers...or rather, interim employees under direct instruction from those researchers. The golem's body is not of immediate concern."

"Thanks for enlightening me. It would've helped to know that sooner!"

"I—I will heal Karan," Zem said. "Nick, Tiana, I need your protection!"

"You got it, Zem! Do your best!"

"Ice Shield!"

Tiana made a wall of ice to protect Karan and Zem, and Nick leaped toward the amalgam golem with his dagger in hand. He slashed the monster again and again without seeming to harm it at all. Despite that, the amalgam golem still turned its attention to Nick as its main target.

That was all Nick needed. He shouted out an order to the others while he dodged its attacks. "Once you heal Karan's wounds, we're going to retreat!"

"You cannot. This is a test, so the door has been locked," the Sword of Bonds responded.

"Excuse me?! This is harassment!"

"No, it is a trial! Curses... I cannot hack open the lock while it is active. The safety measures will not allow it. There are only two ways out of this room: Defeat the amalgam golem or destroy the lock or the wall."

The amalgam golem waved its arms at Nick as if trying to shoo away a mosquito. This was hardly even a fight. Smashing the door or wall of an ancient ruin would be difficult, though. There was a good chance the golem would wipe them out as they tried. Knowing that, Nick decided they should try to defeat it.

"How do we kill this thing?!" he asked the sword.

"...Hmm. That is an interesting question."

"Just answer me!"

"You are going to sell me, are you not? I would love to help you, but I am afraid I don't see any reason to..." The sword sounded as if it was about to burst out into wicked laughter. Nick nearly screamed in response, but he held himself together.

"Okay, okay! What if we promise not to sell you?!"

"That is not enough. You must use me as a weapon."

"Oh, gimme a break! You're in danger, too! Do you want me to throw you into that amalgam golem?!"

"Th-that would be suicide! Do you not see that?!"

"Then help us out! We're in the same boat here!"

"Fine! You have made your point! Nick, was it? Grab my handle!"

"Got it!"

Nick gripped the Sword of Bonds as he dodged the amalgam

golem's attacks and held it before him. Just then, light burst from the swordless handle.

"I-is this your true form?!"

The light coalesced into the shape of a blade, finishing the shape of the sword. Even Nick, who had no sense for magic, could feel that it was releasing massive levels of mana. He stared at it in shock, and the sword spoke proudly.

"Don't be surprised just yet, fool. You have yet to see what I can really do."

"Huh?"

"Hmm, your allies are a dragonian warrior, a mage, and a priest. Is the dragonian girl alive?"

"I'm not dead... What do you want...?" Karan responded. She had regained consciousness thanks to Zem's treatment. But blood was still running down her forehead, and plenty of other visible injuries remained as well.

"Excellent. Think of her and yell 'Union.'"

"That's all? ...*Union!*" Nick yelled, and the Sword of Bonds shone even brighter. "Whoa... Wait, what?" Unfortunately, the light immediately returned to its original brightness. The blade looked exactly as it did before. "Hey..."

"I-it failed. That is strange..."

"No time to dwell on it! We'll have to manage as is!"

The amalgam golem swung its fist at Nick as he stood there flustered. He dodged to the side and swung the Sword of Bonds with his outstretched arm.

"What?!"

The Sword of Bonds sliced smoothly through the golem's right arm; the severed half-limb flew through the air and landed with a plop.

"Hey, well done! We can do this!"

"Stay focused, you imbecile!"

"I know! I'll just cut it to pieces!"

"No, hacking it apart will not work! Behind you!"

Nick lost control of his legs before he could respond. He had only a moment to feel confused before he was hit hard and sent flying through the air.

"Nick!" Zem yelled.

The sound of bones breaking in his body felt distant, like it came from someone else. He was unable to breathe, and the brief moment before he hit the ground felt so long and boring it was like he was stuck watching a dull play. When he landed and realized what happened, his entire body burned with pain.

"Gaaah!" he screamed.

It was the golem's severed arm that held his legs before he was sent flying. The arm had morphed into a miniature version of the original and grabbed him, allowing the original to hit him as hard as

it could with its remaining arm.

“N-Nick...!”

“Karan, you are not healed yet...!”

Karan jumped up after seeing Nick get hit. She shook off Zem’s attempt to stop her and raced toward him.

“You idiot! Don’t...bother with me... Just run... *Cough*,” Nick wheezed.

“No way!” Karan shouted in response, kicking the miniature amalgam golem aside and taking position to protect Nick. The miniature golem turned its focus to Karan and attacked. Its blows were heavy and fast, but even without using her sword, Karan’s attacks were just as strong. Their struggle turned into a back-and-forth fistfight, and Zem took the opportunity to run to Nick’s side.

Zem opened his holy book. *“Recovery!”*

“Grk, thanks!” Nick grunted.

The scratches and bruises on his skin began to heal immediately, but it was going to take a while to heal the broken bones and damage to his internal organs. Even so, Zem continued to chant. Nick’s life would be in danger if he didn’t receive treatment immediately.

“Monsters cannot normally perform healing magic, so people have the advantage in battles of attrition,” the former priest said tensely, watching the small and large amalgam golems.

Karan delivered blow after blow to the miniature golem, which didn’t stand a chance because of its small size. But it was surprisingly tough and always got back up after getting knocked down. The main body was watching the battle calmly, but it stirred to action once it saw that the miniature was starting to struggle. It regrew its lost arm with a goopy sound and walked toward Karan with heavy, thudding footsteps. The sight filled all of them with anxiety.

“Golems don’t seem to feel pain no matter how you injure them... They always fight stubbornly to the end. We need to retreat—”

“As if! I’ll only consider that after we’ve tried everything we can... *Freeze!*” Tiana chanted after interrupting Nick. Her spell sent a furious blizzard from her staff to attack the amalgam golem’s main body, changing the battle completely.

“GWOOOOH?!”

The giant golem slowed and came to a total stop. It wasn’t just its limbs that stopped moving—its swaying, liquid-like surface froze as well. The constantly shifting shape of the amalgam golem had caused light to reflect off it in unpredictable ways, but now that it was still, the reflection made it look like a crystal or a jewel.

“Tiana, what did you do?” Zem asked.

“Instead of hitting it with ice, I used a spell to dramatically lower the temperature. It freezes the target’s body and the moisture in the

air, so it has several effects..." The liquid metal of the golem's body solidified just as Tiana said it would, and it moaned in agony as the blizzard engulfed it.

"GWAAAAH!"

"Wow, I should've done this from the start!" she yelled, wiping sweat from her forehead as she continued to cast the spell. The miniature amalgam golem—which was not hit by the spell—charged at Tiana to save the main body.

"GUGAH!"

"Not so fast!" Karan shouted, stopping the small golem in its tracks. Instead of slashing at the golem, she smashed it with the flat of her sword.

"GWOH?!"

With a splash that sounded like egg yolks dropping into a frying pan, her sword reduced the miniature amalgam golem to a pathetic, flattened shape. Karan then bathed it in fire breath, injuring it significantly. The golem tried to flee from the flames as if it was in pain, but Karan didn't let up.

"GWOO... GAGWOO...!"

Eventually it gave up running, stood still, and grew needlelike points all over its body. Karan's wild instincts told her it was about to try something.

"The small one's about to attack! Come to me!" she shouted. She rushed back to Nick and held her greatsword in front of them like a shield. Tiana and Zem ran behind her as well, arriving just in time before the miniature amalgam golem shot needles out of its entire body. The needles clanged noisily into the Dragonbone Sword, but none penetrated it.

"All right!"

When the attack finally ended, the miniature amalgam golem's body was visibly smaller. It had clearly taken damage. The four of them began to think they had a chance of winning.

"GUUUUOOOOH!"

The amalgam golem's main body roared again. It then began to punch itself. Their eyes went wide at its eccentric behavior, and Tiana realized something with a start.

"...This is bad," she said.

"What is it, Tiana?" Karan asked.

"It's trying to smash the frozen parts of its body and break free! You've got to be kidding!" She resumed the Freeze spell that the miniature amalgam golem interrupted, but she was a split second too late.

"GUOH GUOH GUOH GUOH!"

The amalgam golem plunged its fingers into a crevice it had

created in its own body and tore at it. Then, like a crustacean shedding its shell, a slightly smaller amalgam golem emerged from the hardened outer layer. Its strange actions didn't stop there; next, it thrust its fingers into its chest and pulled as hard as it could to the right and left until its body had split cleanly into two medium-size copies of itself. Together with the miniature one Karan was fighting, there were now three amalgam golems in the room.

"...How is this fair?!" Tiana muttered hoarsely. Freeze was ineffective over a wide area. There was no way Tiana could freeze three different targets at once, and if she focused on one, the other two would interfere.

"There is no sense in explaining rules and etiquette to us at this point, Nick. Let's give this one final push. I cannot heal your injuries further without more time, so please do your best to bear the pain," Zem said. He readied his mace.

"You need to listen to me! You could use me as a decoy to buy time to break down the wall, or... There must be a way to save at least the three of you!" Nick shouted, but his party members ignored him.

The other three fought with perfect chemistry as Nick lay there injured. You would never have known they had been adventurers for less than a month. Karan swung her sword with reckless abandon, and Tiana fired spells accurately without hitting her. Zem healed Karan's injuries and protected Tiana, recasting support magic at the optimal moments. Nick watched as he sat there in pain. They were protecting him without the need for him to give out constant commands.

"Huh... They can handle themselves without me having to fuss over every little thing..." he whispered to himself.

Nick had no idea how long the battle had dragged on. It felt like it had been less than a minute but also more than thirty. The strange emotions he felt watching his party members had scrambled his sense of time. Their teamwork had been such a mess during their first adventure, but now they were fighting in perfect sync.

Nick blinked back tears. No matter a party's strong chemistry, they could still encounter an enemy that was beyond their capabilities. His heart was going to break at that cruel reality.

"Gyaah!"

One of the medium-size amalgam golems sent Karan flying through the air, and she happened to land next to Nick.

"Karan."

"What?!"

"I'm sure you guys are almost out of mana and stamina. This is your last chance. Take Zem and Tiana and go. Breaking the wall down should be easy for you."

“No way!”

“Listen to me!”

“I...I decided I won't be a coward or a traitor!”

“Running won't make you either one of those things in this situation, you idiot! I'm responsible for putting this party together! I'm the reason you're all here... *Cough.*”

A shock of pain from his broken bones ran through Nick's body with every word he spoke. But he couldn't remain silent. Two feelings dominated his mind—the fear that he might have been arrogant to believe he could turn their lives around, and the desire for them to not die here—and that mixture had caused him to give an order that was unlike him.

But Karan didn't care about his feelings. “Shut up and open your eyes! Believe in me! Maybe you should reconsider your own belief that we're going to lose!”

“You're so stubborn...,” Nick responded, exasperated.

Undeterred, Karan collected her breath and stood up. Tiana and Zem were fighting as hard as they could to hold back the golems that were attempting to chase after her. The two probably couldn't last much longer than a minute or two.

“I'll end it with the next attack! Hold them back!” Karan shouted.

“Understood!” Zem responded.

“Be quick about it!” Tiana requested.

Karan saw how hard they were fighting and decided she could count on them. Then, intending to finally break them all out of this predicament, she began to prepare herself to perform her deadliest attack at its greatest potential. She knew that slash attacks had no effect, but the success of the blunt strike she delivered to the miniature amalgam golem gave her an idea. She focused her mind intently to summon her full strength.

“...Karan. Let me say one thing,” Nick called out calmly. He knew there was no point in making a scene. He had no choice but to trust his companions. Instead, he decided to make sure he had no regrets.

“What?”

“I'm sorry for breaking your pendant.” Karan didn't respond, but he didn't let that deter him. “You said you forgave me, but...it was really important to you, wasn't it? I'm truly sorry.”

“...Nick.”

“I'm kind of the party's temporary leader, so I'm sure some things are difficult to say to me. I want you to tell me when you're unhappy with something. You have the right.”

“...That's not it.”

“So... *Cough...* I want you to live your best life, regardless of what others think.”

“I’m telling you, you have it wrong! I’m...I’m *happy* you broke it!” Karan yelled angrily.

Nick stared at her, stunned. “K-Karan...?”

“That pendant...was given to me by the leader of my previous party. I wanted to throw it away but couldn’t bring myself to!” Her angry yell became a confession. “It took me so long to believe it! I couldn’t accept that I was deceived...and abandoned like a dirty rag! I felt like I would wake up one morning to have Callios tell me ‘That was just a joke, you dummy!’ But deep down I knew that all I was really doing was running!”

“Karan...”

She was sobbing now. “The reality is that Callios is gone, and you’re not him! He told me to trust him. He pampered me because he wanted me to remain an idiot, to stay as I was... But you told me to learn, and to doubt... And you broke the pendant! You’re always so strict with me!”

“That’s just part of my personality...”

“Exactly! You make me do the things I need to do! You’re really annoying... And we’re the only ones who could put up with you!”

“I’m grateful to you guys! You’re gonna make me cry!”

“So you can say whatever you want to me! You don’t have to hold back! I’ll never abandon you... Whatever you want from me, I’ll make it happen!”

Karan began pouring mana into the Dragonbone Sword as she spoke. The overflow leaked out of the sword as hot air, and Karan herself seemed to burn like a fireball. At the same time, Tiana exhausted the last of her mana and collapsed to the ground, unable to continue casting the spells she was using to hold off the golems. Her breathing was raspy.

“Tiana!” Zem shouted. He rushed toward her, but healing magic could not restore mana. He readied his mace to at least protect her.

“GUUUOOOOOAAAH!”

Unexpectedly, the three amalgam golems ignored Tiana and gathered together. When they all embraced, they fused together to form the initial giant, which then set its sights on Karan.

The fight was now a duel between Karan and the golem. Everyone could sense that this would decide the battle. Nick watched Karan and prayed for her safety. That was when the Sword of Bonds, which had remained silent for some time, began to overflow with vast mana.

“Very good... Your wavelengths match and have reached a sufficient level. This time I will demonstrate my power in full.”

“Huh? What are you...?”

The Sword of Bonds’ voice sounded different. It was more majestic—calm, like a wizened old sage—and Nick could feel himself being drawn to its words.

"What is it that makes a person? Each holy sword forged by the sages was made with a hypothesis in mind. I defined people as societal creatures. Just as coral makes a colony, two people can join hands and essentially function as one creature. They cannot join physically like coral, but even so, if they join hands and combine their strength, they can accomplish feats they never could alone. A mysterious wavelength is formed when their hearts become one. I recognize that you two are people capable of doing that."

"I didn't understand a word of that... But you're saying it'll work?"

"Nick. Chant the spell one more time. I guarantee it will succeed."

What're you going on about now? Nick thought. *It's your fault we're in this mess in the first place.* But rather than complain, he bit his tongue.

That was the kind of job being an adventurer was. Adventurers were idiots who charged headfirst into danger despite the whole point of the job being to make enough money to live another day. Nick didn't want to work his ass off for blockheads he didn't respect, and in his opinion, risking one's life was ludicrous in the first place. That was how he felt.

Despite that, as Nick watched the three distrustful, inconsistent, idiotic adventurers in the room with him, he felt no dislike toward them. He didn't want them to die before his own eyes, which was why he had yelled at them to leave. He was willing to give up his own life if it meant saving them. But if there was even an inkling of hope, he was going to cling to it and try to survive.

"Here goes nothing... *Union!*" Nick chanted, and his and Karan's bodies lit up. A tremendous flash of light and the sound of an explosion followed. They all closed their eyes to shield themselves from the brightness.

The light settled where Nick had been sitting...

"Wh-who are you?" Zem asked, bewildered.

...But Nick was gone, and standing in his place was a silver knight.

The knight looked like a dragonian at first glance. Their right arm was covered in scales from the elbow down, and a tail swayed behind them. It wasn't Karan, though. The knight had Karan's red hair and red scales but did not have a feminine figure. Their face had a beauty to it that looked neither masculine nor feminine, and it resembled Nick's features.

The clothing differed as well—instead of Karan's leather armor, the knight was wearing mystical armor that shone with a dim white light. While the right arm looked like that of a strong dragonian, the left arm wore the armor and gauntlet of a traditional knight.

The sword the knight was holding in their right hand was clearly the Sword of Bonds, but the blade looked nothing like it did when Nick produced it earlier; instead, it assumed the large form of Karan's Dragonbone Sword.

““Let’s do this!””

The knight’s dignified voice sounded neither male nor female.



The Power of Nick and Karan's Bond



The silver knight swung their sword at lightning speed, delivering blow after blow to the amalgam golem. It had no hope of dodging.

“GAAAAAAAH?!”

The amalgam golem screamed in genuine agony.

The knight wasn't mindlessly swinging their sword at the golem's body—they were using their furious swings to shave off its skin. The golem was no match for the knight's speed and power, and it was given no window to counter.

“Watch out!” Zem yelled, and the silver knight glowered at the amalgam golem.

““Hmm...?””

The golem morphed its shape like a slime and absorbed the fragments of itself that the silver knight had cut off. It then began to restore its body.

“GWUOOOOH... WUOOOH!”

“It's back to normal... Wait, that's not all!”

Zem noticed a change on the surface of the amalgam golem's body when it screamed. Densely packed needlelike projections began to grow all over its body until it almost resembled a hedgehog.

““Zem! Protect Tiana!”” the silver knight ordered.

“O-okay!” Zem responded before snapping to action and dragging the collapsed Tiana away from the golem. The amalgam golem fired the needles in every direction like bullets.

“Aaaaah!”

Zem screamed, but just when he was about to get skewered in the back, the needles melted like snow on a sunny day.

““Take this!””

The silver knight wrapped their body in flames and used that heat

to melt all the amalgam golem's needles. The golem retreated a step, as if scared of the intense heat. It knew that the heat was only a byproduct of the attack that was to come.

As heat gathered around the sword, the knight held it in the same stance as Karan's Fire Dragon Slash, but it shone significantly brighter than any flames. The light grew as bright as the sun, and the room was filled with a dazzling white.

"The amalgam golem has a core that controls its movement. Its ability to freely manipulate the liquid metal of its body makes finding and hitting the core difficult, so you may be forced to slowly chip away at its body. Alternatively...", the Sword of Bonds explained, but before it could finish, the silver knight swung their searing hot blade down on the golem.

"GWAAAAAAH?!"

The heat ravaged the amalgam golem's body, and it screamed and screamed. The blow was so powerful it didn't matter where the core was hidden.

"...The fastest way to defeat it is with an overwhelmingly powerful attack... Just like that," the sword said, finishing its explanation.

The amalgam golem was gone in just moments. Its liquid metal body was destroyed completely, and all that remained were slight traces of it stuck to the wall and floor. There was a misshapen, fist-size gem on the floor where the golem was. It was likely the core.

Tiana slowly sat up nearby.

"Tiana, are you okay?!" Zem asked.

"Y-yeah. I only collapsed because I ran out of mana. More importantly, we did it... Right?" Tiana answered evasively. She observed the unbelievable state of the room in a daze, then quickly jumped up. "Wh-who are you?! ...Is that you, Nick? ...Or you, Karan?"

She ran toward the silver knight, and they smiled back at her.

"Hey, Tiana and Zem. It's all okay... *Split!*" they said, and with a flash of light, the silver knight disappeared.

"Nick? Karan?"

Nick and Karan collapsed to the floor in exhaustion where the silver knight was.

"I'm dead tired..."

"Yeah... I'm hungry, too..."

Gasping for breath, Nick and Karan stretched out their arms and legs on the floor and remained lying down.

"That is to be expected. This was your first time experiencing Union. It is impressive that you are conscious at all," the Sword of Bonds said.

"That's what you meant by turning bonds into strength... That would definitely be impossible if you and your companion weren't in perfect sync. It felt like my body was going to be ripped apart," Nick

responded.

Union was a spell that existed only in legends. According to the Sword of Bonds, it dated back long before the ancient civilization, in a time when the boundary between gods, monsters, and people was vague. When it launched into a technical explanation about how the spell combined mind and body to transition the entities into a higher being—whatever that meant—everyone except for Tiana gave up on following it.

“So in short, Karan and I combined and gained super strength. Is that about right?” Nick asked.

“That is a massive oversimplification... But technically, you are right. All of your best features—Nick’s skill and agility, Karan’s strength and her divine protection of the fire dragon—were amplified, were they not?”

“Yeah, they were. I felt powerful beyond my wildest dreams...”

“See, I told you my power would be helpful.” The sword sounded like it was grinning smugly.

“Well, someone’s happy with themselves.”

“Of course I am! ...That said, you two performed impressively as well. My power is dependent on the capability of my wielder. Also, not many have succeeded at using Union on just their second try. You should be proud.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks,” Nick responded, getting up with a sigh. He had finally recovered enough from Zem’s healing magic to move. “Let’s take a vote. Should we take the Sword of Bonds back to the Adventurers Guild like we promised or should we not sell it? What do you think?”

“Hmm... It’s really strong. We could use it,” Karan said.

“I agree. It could serve as insurance in times of emergency,” Zem stated.

They were both on board, but Tiana hesitated. “Are you sure that’ll be okay? Finding this sword was the whole point of this expedition. If we keep it without telling the Adventurers Guild, won’t we get in trouble for a breach of contract?”

“...Yeah, probably. It would certainly be a breach of contract if they find out we nicked it in secret. The guild really wants this sword. We could receive serious disciplinary action,” Nick answered, looking troubled.

“So what should we do?”

“We need to figure that out. If anyone has an idea, raise your hand.”

“Haah... You’re really not one for planning ahead, are you?” Tiana sighed with a shrug.

“That’s true of most adventurers. Have any ideas, Tiana?” Nick asked. Tiana put her hand to her chin and thought.

“Hmm... I wonder if they would notice if we just disguised the Sword of Bonds. We could report to the guild that we didn’t find anything and just keep using the sword. No one alive today has seen it

anyway. Even the guild only knows its basic function. They don't know anything about what it looks like."

"I see," Zem responded.

"Wow, you're so smart," Karan praised.

Tiana smiled boastfully. "Hmm-hmm, aren't I?"

"I...am not so sure that would work," the Sword of Bonds said. "Are holy swords so easily obtained that you all could casually claim to have another in your possession? I know nothing of the market of this era, but if such a weapon were affordable, you all would be wearing much better equipment. I could believe it of the mage, but the rest of you... Am I wrong?"

The Survivors were wearing plain leather armor. As the holy sword pointed out, they didn't currently have the financial leeway to buy a luxurious spell-endowed item.

"Uh, well...", Tiana began shyly.

"Yes?"

"We could say I got rich gambling..."

"Nope, not gonna work. Any other ideas?" Nick interrupted.

"What do you mean?!"

"Oh, come on. You've never won big with dragon racing."

"It's only a matter of time! And I have too won big before!"

"We still need a story the guild'll believe."

Tiana pouted at Nick's lack of trust in her. "Fine, have it your way!"

"Seriously, though, there are adventurers who are better at appraising items than many merchants... Fooling them all when it comes to a legendary artifact will take more than just changing its appearance."

"Oh, I see..." Tiana slumped her shoulders in disappointment.

The Sword of Bonds spoke up arrogantly upon seeing that. "Hmm-hmm, it sounds like you all are in need of my wisdom."

"If you have an idea, spit it out already," Nick snapped. They all glared at the sword.

"D-do not be angry. I was simply enjoying our conversation," it countered. It then began to speak of its idea. "First, allow me to correct a misconception. You all were tasked with finding a Sword of Bonds. You do not need me to accomplish this."

"...What does that mean?"

"The 'Sword of Bonds' is my personal name, but it is also the product name—and the name of the project. Many versions with limited functionality were made in the process of completing me."

"Huh?!" Nick and the others reacted with shock.

The Sword of Bonds laughed, sounding amused. "Kah-ha-ha, does that surprise you? There is actually a vault full of them beneath my pedestal. They were kept in reserve in case they were ever needed. You are free to take one."

"The guild certainly never said there was only one... This changes things," Nick said.

"As I said, however, they are limited in their functionality. They cannot use Union, which is my most important power. They can gather mana from the wielder's companions to strengthen the sword, but their power falls short of mine by more than half. That said, each

one is undeniably a Sword of Bonds. Handing one to the guild should solve your problem.”

“...This feels really close to a scam. We’re not lying, at least.” Nick sighed, feeling troubled.

“You worry too much for one your age, young swordsman.”

“It’s my nature. There’re still problems, though. People are gonna get suspicious if we carry around a sword that looks exactly like the one stored in the guild. We could use you only on adventures, but we never know when someone could see us. You’ll end up spending just as much time in storage.”

“Do not worry; I thought of that, too. Union is my most important function, but not my only one. I am self-aware and can perform limitless maintenance on myself with Self-Repair. My sense of hearing is superb, and I can use Search to sense nearby abnormalities. I also have Telepathy, which enables me to exchange thoughts at short range without speaking out loud. And that is not all.”

“You’re super useful... What’s Telepathy, though? That sounds scary,” Tiana said.

“You don’t know? There should have been telepath orbs placed on the false final floor. They are magic items that allow one to use Telepathy.”

“No... I’ve heard of communication orbs, though.”

Communication orbs were a magic item popular in the Holy Kingdom of Dineez. Cities above a certain population level were required to set communication orbs for correspondence with the central government. A few wealthy merchants had also started postal services that used communication orbs to send letters quickly.

“Those are cheap magic items capable only of sending one page’s worth of information and black-and-white pictures. Those may have a place in the office, but Telepathy is far more useful for adventurers. It does have the flaw of only working at short distances, though.”

“Interesting... Hold on, we’ve gotten off topic. Go ahead and tell us your idea for how to disguise yourself,” Nick pressed.

“Such impatience. I have one more important function. It is called Parallel...”

A Time for Bad Habits



In the conference room of the Fishermen Adventurers Guild, Nick and the other four Survivors were sitting opposite Vilma. The older woman wore a smile cheerful enough to almost make them forget her usual scowl.

“Well done, you all. I’m very impressed you were able to complete this request,” she said.

“This is the Sword of Bonds,” Nick announced, unwrapping the cloth and showing Vilma the sword handle. It was bladeless and looked exactly like the handle the group found on the final floor of the Labyrinth of Bonds.

“Oh-ho... This is what it looks like. Did you all try it out?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t that hard to use.”

“Really! Demonstrate for me.”

“Sure thing.” Nick got up and held the handle before him. “*Ignition*,” he chanted, and a blade of light emerged from the hilt. Vilma’s eyes went wide.

“I see—it’s an aura blade. That makes sense,” she said.

“Is that what you call this?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. An aura blade is a magic sword that makes a blade out of mana. Only the very best magic swords are called holy swords... This one certainly lives up to the moniker.”

“Glad to hear it.” Nick sounded apathetic.

“Where’s the excitement? It’s thanks to you we obtained it. It’s not as powerful as I expected, though. I would have liked it to be a little stronger.”

“Hey, don’t say that. We went through a lot of trouble to get this for you.”

“I’m not blaming you. This is a high-quality artifact regardless. Don’t worry; you’ll get the reward I promised.”

Nick’s heart skipped a beat when Vilma began casually assessing the sword, but he made sure nothing showed on his face. They had

given her one of the swords with limited functionality. He thought for a moment she might have seen through the ruse, but he maintained his composure upon realizing she hadn't.

"Since you tried it out after activating it, describe what it's like."

"You can adjust the length at will. Two meters is the limit, though."

"Any other notable characteristics?"

"The strength of the sword seems to increase depending on how many party members you have. We didn't check to see how much."

That was all true. The other Sword of Bonds couldn't use Union, but it could temporarily increase its strength using the mana of the wielder's companions.

"So that is its power... All right, your job is done. We'll give you your completion bonus right away," Vilma announced.

"That was hard work. You'd better not cheap out on us," Nick warned.

"You'll receive the appraisal amount soon. Please be patient... By the way," she began, looking at the fifth member of the Survivors currently sitting behind Nick.

The person answered with a quizzical tone. "Do you have business with me?"

"I'm Vilma, an employee here. Nice to meet you, ma'am... Or should I say sir? Anyhow, are you a new member of the Survivors?"

"Yes, that is correct. I am genderless... But for the sake of convenience, let us say I am a boy."

"Huh...? Well, I expect all new members to write and present proof of identity."

"Oh, yes. That is precisely why I am here."

A young boy (?) who spoke like a much older person walked up to Vilma. He had distinctive white hair, and his face resembled Nick's. They looked like they could have been brothers...or brother and sister, for that matter.

"...You two really look alike. Are you related?" Vilma inquired.

"N-no, but... Uh, I'm taking care of him," Nick answered.

"Hmm. What's your name?" the woman asked.

"Bond," the kid said.

"That's way too obvious, you dolt," Nick whispered quietly so Vilma couldn't hear.

"Just like the sword. I've heard stranger coincidences, I guess," she commented. "Make sure you turn in that paperwork."

"I shall have it done!" Bond responded, puffing out his chest proudly.

Once they finished collecting their reward and filling out paperwork

at the Fishermen Adventurers Guild, the party went to Tiana's apartment. Nick locked the door once everyone was inside, then closed the window curtains and scrupulously checked to make sure no one was listening from the attic or on the other side of the walls.

"How stupid are you?!" Nick yelled angrily at Bond.

"Wh-what?! I fail to see the problem!" Bond shouted back.

"Do you realize what's gonna happen if they realize your identity?!"

"Th-there is no reason for such anger."

"There are countless false names you could've chosen that would've been better than that... I doubt many people would ever think that a sword could turn into a person, but we didn't need to invite needless suspicion."

"I would have been uncomfortable choosing a name that doesn't represent me. Names are important."

"Even so..."

"There's nothing we can do about it, Nick," Tiana interrupted, shrugging. "Magic items with a consciousness are bound by their name to an extent. Giving one a name too far removed from their true nature can have an effect on their power. For example, if you name a sword Mop, it might take on features of a mop. It'll start gaining abilities like making your room a little cleaner every time you swing it."

"...I have to admit, a mop sword sounds pretty funny," Nick replied.

"That's why you can't be careless with the name. Don't be too hard on him. Everything went according to plan, after all."

"Guess I can't blame him, then... Sorry for yelling at you like that."

"Do not worry about it. It is a perfectly reasonable concern."

The group took two actions to conceal the Sword of Bonds' identity. The first was to take one of the Sword of Bonds with limited functionality to give to Vilma. The second was to use the Sword of Bonds' ability called Parallel. That ability scanned the information of the sword's wielder and used it as a base to create a human body. The body was closer to a golem than a person, but it would take an advanced analysis spell to discover that.

Nick was currently the official owner, so the sword took the form of a young boy—or girl—resembling him.

"By the way, are you a boy or a girl?" Nick asked.

"Neither. Regardless of which I may resemble, I cannot produce offspring. I am fine with identifying as either one... Ah, but I kind of want to try wearing cute clothes. Maybe I should adjust my features to appear more girlish..."

“Absolutely not,” Zem interrupted emphatically. “I do not want to be around young girls.”

“U-understood,” Bond responded, cowering from Zem’s sudden intimidating attitude. The former priest’s eyes seemed occupied with a distant memory.

“Aren’t you a clone of me anyway?” Nick asked.

“Altering my form slightly would be a walk in the park. I think being a girl would be way cuter,” Bond answered.

“Is this some kinda fetish?”

“What is wrong with wanting to look cute?”

Bond glanced at Zem, but he shook his head vigorously.

“He’s been through some stuff. Consider his feelings,” Nick urged.

Bond sighed exasperatedly. “Fine.”

“Moving on. Congrats on a successful mission, everyone. I’d normally call it a day here...but we need to discuss Bond,” Nick said.

“What do you mean?” Bond asked.

“Who’s gonna take care of you? Do you need a bed? Or food?”

Bond nodded. “This body expends quite a lot of energy. I will require sleep and nourishment. I want to enjoy myself now that I have finally emerged to the outside world.”

“You don’t have any money, though. We need to choose one of us to take care of you for the time being.”

“I do not appreciate being treated like a stray dog you found on the street. But if you insist, it should be you, Nick. You are my owner.”

“Me? Really?”

Nick looked at the other three for help, but they all averted their eyes.

“Isn’t there something else we should be doing right now? I can’t wait any longer,” Tiana pleaded impatiently, eyeing the bag Nick was holding.

“Geez, fine...” Nick upended the bag over a table to shake out ten thousand dina. “All right, everyone, this is our reward!”

““““Whoo-hoo!””””

Tiana, Zem, and Karan exclaimed joyfully.

“Man, I really wasn’t sure I would be able to find my footing here,” Tiana admitted.

“For sure. I could easily have ended up dead on the side of the road,” Zem agreed.

“It was really hard...,” Karan muttered.

“What’re you guys getting all sappy for? This day’s only just getting started,” Nick said, smiling boldly in response to their emotional reactions.

“Oh, are we going out for drinks?” Bond asked, but Nick shook his

It's called 'Encounter After the Rain'!"
"~~~~~"YEEEEAAAAHHHHH!!"~~~~~"

The fans went crazy after her surprise announcement.

Agate's image differed slightly from the current idol craze. The most popular idols these days combined intense lyrics and dances to put on high-energy concerts. Agate, however, didn't rely on flashy choreography or production. She had the utmost confidence in her singing.

She was actually more of a minstrel than an idol. But unlike traditional minstrels, she had an innocent and straightforward personality. One would expect an idol working in Labyrinth City to lose some innocence and gain a cynical view, but that was not the case with her. There were some who criticized her for being too naive and doubted her image would work in Labyrinth City. At the very least, however, it was undeniable that her genuine cheerfulness had saved many people.

"I'm so happy to be alive!" Nick shouted as he waved his navy blue magic glow stick. He wasn't escaping from his troubles without a thought for the future like he was when he attended idol concerts before; he was immersing himself in his hobby after securing the money he needed to support himself. He even had the financial means now to buy a front row seat *and* merchandise.

Agate's words from that day repeated in Nick's head once more. *Idols make people happy and give them courage!* Nick had definitely worn the expression of a man who was near death back then. The same could be said of Tiana, Zem, and Karan when he met them.

Nick had a thought. If Agate hadn't approached him that day and given him that concert ticket, how would his life have ended up? If he had met the other three at Newbies anyway, would he have decided to form a party with them? Would things have gone just as well, or would he have used them nefariously for his own personal gain? There was no way for him to know.

What he did know was that Agate changed his life. After meeting her, he was only ever going to choose to form the Survivors and resume work as an adventurer. She gave him courage on that day.

"All right, that was my new song, 'Encounter After the Rain'! Thank you very much!"

Agate waved at her fans, out of breath after singing her heart out.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" Nick yelled, waving back with tearful eyes.

"Hey, this concert's far from over! It's too early for tears! Time for the next song!"

"~~~~~"YEEEEAAAAHHHHH!!"~~~~~"

Nick was alive. Alive and happy. Somewhere, the other three were

experiencing the same level of bliss.

“Run, Meteor Arrow! Don’t give up!” Tiana screamed while tightly gripping a betting ticket. She was cheering on a dragon, her bloodshot eyes more intense than they had been during any adventure. That intensity was matched by every other spectator at the racetrack. Her shouts of encouragement became one with the passionate cheers of the crowd and spurred the dragons on.

As if in response, Meteor Arrow roared. It kicked its black-scaled rear legs vigorously off the ground, sending up dust behind it. It passed one dragon after another as they rounded a large corner, reaching second place as it entered the final straight. It then accelerated rapidly using the energy it had patiently saved for the final spurt.

“Meteor Arrow takes first place! What a comeback!”

“LET’S GOOOOO!” Tiana screamed, clenching her fists.

This was a big race for her. The weather had been sunny for several days in a row, resulting in a dry dirt track. There was a wide turn before the end—and a slight incline on the straights. Tiana’s independent research revealed that these conditions heavily favored Meteor Arrow.

“Mwah-ha-ha! Heck yeah!”

“Someone’s feeling good about themselves. Care to share some of that luck with me?”

“Oh, Ol’ Take. Long time no see.”

The old man who spoke to Tiana was a tipster who frequented the racetrack. Tipsters were normally kicked out, but he was allowed in because he didn’t do it year-round; he was known to occasionally offer commentary instead of betting tips. Ol’ Take approached Tiana out of an interest in her analysis-based predictions, and before long they became racetrack buddies.

Tiana saw the old man fumbling with a cigarette and snapped her fingers to cast a spell called Ignite. A fire lit at the end of the cigarette.

“Thanks... Ah, this is wonderful,” the old man said.

“What are you doing with a cigarette? Aren’t those expensive?” Tiana asked.

“I made more money off my tips than I expected. Want one?”

“...I’m afraid I’ll get addicted if I start, so I’ll pass. I prefer pipes anyway.”

She pulled her pipe out of her pocket and showed it to him. Many mages smoked pipes, including her instructor at school. It was from him that she acquired a taste for it. She had been refraining from buying tobacco leaves lately to save money, but now that she had money to burn, she could afford to indulge herself. She stuffed

tobacco into her pipe and chanted Ignite.

“Taking care of a pipe is too much effort... Anyway, I haven’t seen you here lately. Did something happen?”

Tiana took a puff of her pipe. She blew out the smoke and watched the wind gently carry it away. “I was busy at work.”

“Wow, you found a job?”

“I’m an adventurer.”

“Huh, I wouldn’t have thought a lady like you... Actually, you kind of look the part.”

Ol’ Take watched Tiana with amusement in his eyes.

She smiled wickedly. “How dare you insult a noble like that... I have more fun at the racetrack, though. Adventuring and then spending my free time here suits me.”

“Hah, glad to hear it. Make sure not to get cocky just because work is going well. You’ll fall on hard times again.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to make sure this remains a hobby.”

Contrary to her words, Tiana was getting pretty excited. She had even convinced herself it would be totally fine to pour her earnings from this race right back into another ticket, forgetting about her rule of making sure she kept at least a little bit of the money. To be fair, she had put aside money to take care of rent, living expenses, and adventuring, so it was unlikely she would end up in financial straits because of gambling losses again. She had learned her lesson at least somewhat. That security allowed her to relax and focus on the races.

Tiana had never felt more alive.

“Wow, it’s Zem. Nice to see you again. Didn’t I tell you last time you needed to find a job?”

A hostess named Melissa happily welcomed Zem after he walked inside.

“Don’t worry; I have become a serious adventurer,” Zem responded.

“Truly?”

Zem went to his favorite hostess club for the first time since he started working. He was a handsome man, talented at healing magic, but he looked like the definition of a corrupt priest back when he frequented this place. The news that he had found a real job surprised the women at the club. He spent his life savings so self-indulgently when he arrived in Labyrinth City that Melissa had thought he would eventually run out of money and die an early death.

“I guess that means money won’t be an issue. Will you have a few drinks?” Melissa asked.

“That sounds wonderful. Allow me to get us started,” Zem said.

“““Yaaaay!”””

Zem sat Melissa down next to him and took a swig of alcohol. It was a slow day at the club, and the bored women excitedly sat at his table.

"Hey, Zem, tell us about your adventures."

"I want to hear about them, too!"

"All right, all right. If you insist, little kittens."

Zem began to speak of his adventures. He didn't try to make himself sound heroic like many others may have done. "Then I slipped and ended up covered in slime from head to toe." "We turned a corner and found a napping ogre the size of a house. I thought I was going to die." "And just when I believed all was lost..." He entertained the women by delivering his stories as if he were telling a fairy tale to a group of children. That was his practiced method.

Growing up, Zem read countless bedtime stories to the younger kids he took care of in the orphanage. He was skilled at talking about his experiences in an entertaining manner, so much so that it was no surprise when the women hung on his every word like children despite how sick they were of listening to men brag to them every day. His cynical and amusing yet straightforward delivery set their hearts racing.

"All right, that seems like a good stopping point for tonight."

"What, it was just getting good."

"I may be tempted to continue if you treat me to a free drink."

"Geez, someone's getting a bit carried away tonight," Melissa teased as she poured a drink into Zem's empty cup. "Although, you really do look different."

"Do I?"

"How can I put it...? You used to look like a tramp addicted to the company of women. You look normal now."

Zem burst out laughing in response to her candid words. "Ha-ha, is that so? Should I take that as a compliment?"

"Hmm, I wonder."

Melissa played innocent, but she was undoubtedly praising him. He came to the club not for comfort and escape, but as a normal person who simply wanted to have a good time. Consoling brokenhearted people was an important part of the job for women who worked in the nightlife industry, but being able to have some casual fun like this provided a valuable balance to their day. Zem wasn't just a skilled storyteller; he wanted to enjoy the night and make sure the women did as well. That was why the women enjoyed listening to him so much.

They shared trifling conversation late into the night. This was when the real fun began in nightlife establishments such as this. Zem enjoyed himself from the bottom of his heart.

Of the many shopping districts throughout Labyrinth City, adventurers were most fond of Hammer Alley. They visited it frequently for the shops selling weapons and armor. Karan was no exception. Adventurers seeking equipment typically arrived with a fat purse, and bars and food stalls dotted the streets to capitalize on this. As a result, the district remained lively even after the blacksmiths closed up shop.

Karan was exploring the depths of Hammer Alley. Shopping districts always had hidden restaurants tucked away in easy-to-miss spots—restaurants that somehow stayed in business despite their less-than-ideal location and lack of advertising. Karan opened the door and entered such a restaurant.

“...Welcome. Are you alone?” asked a surly-looking man. When Karan nodded, he bluntly told her, “Sit at the counter.”

The inside of the restaurant appeared old but not unsanitary. There were visible scratches on the oak counter, but it had clearly been wiped clean. Satisfied, Karan sat down.

“What do you want to drink?”

“Wine is fine.”

Wine was served in place of tea at restaurants in Labyrinth City. Tea was expensive because of the difficulty cultivating it in the region. As such, it was customary for restaurants to serve diluted wine before meals.

“Here you go. Got your order?”

The employee served the wine in a wooden cup instead of a glass. That wasn't very professional, but it did give the place a comfortable, down-to-earth atmosphere.

“I want wild boar fried rice.”

“Comin' right up.”

This restaurant specialized in meat from wild animals, which wasn't very popular among adventurers. It was believed that the pigs raised for consumption within Labyrinth City tasted much better than wild boar that could be caught on the way to a labyrinth. However, it was a misconception that wild animals couldn't taste just as good. It simply required the knowledge of a professional hunter who knew how to handle the meat.

The founder of this restaurant was an adventurer who disliked the trend toward meat raised for consumption and opened this place as a hobby. The food wasn't exactly gourmet, but it was delicious and beloved by connoisseurs. There was a rumor that Solo Diner Fifs was a regular customer.

The smell is a little strange, Karan thought. A fragrance that was sweet despite the stink of animal flesh wafted from the kitchen. Shortly afterward, the man served her meal in a bowl and handed it to her.

“Here’s yer fried rice. Enjoy.”

The dish consisted of long-grain rice tinged yellow with spices and mixed with potherbs and scattered chunks of meat. Most meals containing rice came from the south along with other things such as katanas, but this particular meal came from nomadic peoples to the west. The taste of the rice differed slightly from the southern type, and a bowl of soup was served with it. The soup had only two ingredients—stock extracted from the boar’s bones and green onions.

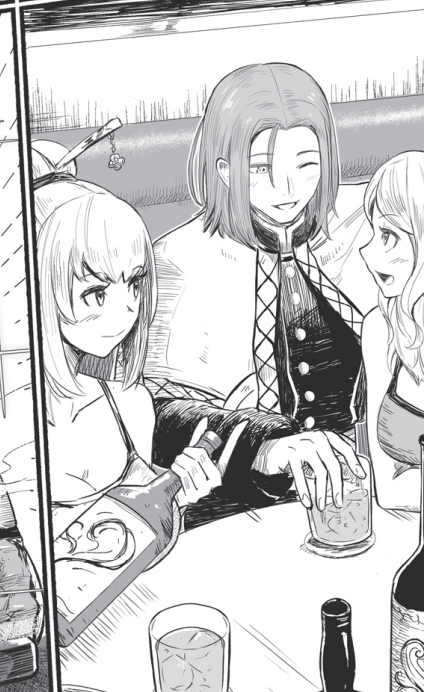
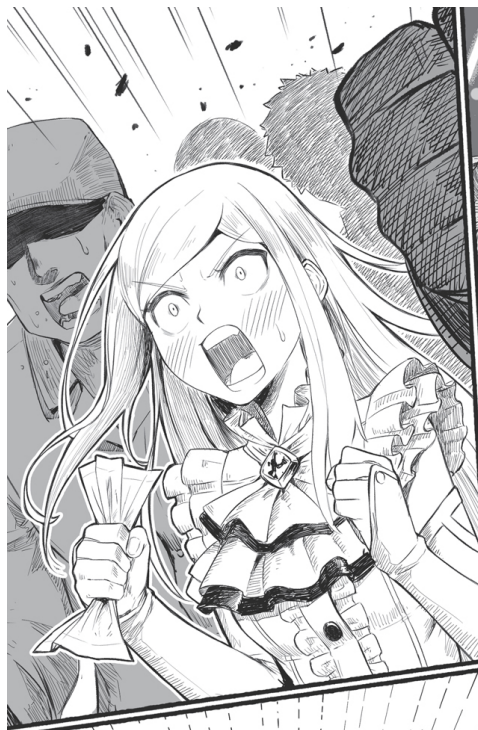
Taking a spoon in her hand, Karan ate a big mouthful of rice.

So good...

The meat was lean and savory. The taste was distinctive, but as she chewed, the flavored rice together with the unique ingredients of pickled ginger and raisins all came together in perfect harmony.

There was also no one else in the restaurant to get in the way of her meal. Technically speaking, this was the first time Karan had ever actually eaten alone at a restaurant. She was following around Solo Diner Fifs when she first discovered the wonders of eating alone, so she was never actually by herself. Once she ran low on her traveling expenses, she spent almost all of her time with Nick, Tiana, and Zem. That she could walk around the city without a guide and enjoy food in a restaurant on her own showed real growth.

But it wasn’t thoughts of her growth that occupied Karan’s mind. She was thinking only of the delicious food filling her mouth—and feeling joy at having found a great restaurant like a true gourmet. She enjoyed her short break from work to the fullest.



Adventurers with Trust Issues



Street vendors always made a racket on sunny days.

The street containing many cheap inns that ran from the post station to the Fishermen Adventurers Guild was called Tabby Cat Street by the locals. Street vendors set up stalls all along the street hoping to entice adventurers returning from expeditions by selling food, alcohol, tools and medicine useful for adventurers, and daily necessities. The name of the street referred to the cats that gathered hoping to snag any fish that the fishermen dropped, but it could just as easily refer to the annoying street vendors.

“You’ll find the best prices right here! Young man, how about grilled octolegs?”

“I’ve got medicine made from dried alraune leaves! That’s not a lie! I went through a ton of effort to find them!”

“I’ll take care of all your equipment needs! I can sharpen swords, alter armor, repair shoes, you name it!”

“Are you free tonight, handsome?”

It was currently morning when they were at their noisiest and most incessant. Some merchants went beyond shouting and grabbed at sleeves and bags. Nick batted their hands away as he forced his way through the crowded street. That was the only way he would ever make it to the Fishermen Adventurers Guild where his companions were waiting.

“Geez, this street is a pain in the ass... Are you keepin’ up, Bond?” Nick asked.

“Merchants are insufferable no matter the era,” Bond answered.

“That’s for sure... Huh?”

Nick caught sight of a familiar face. A red-haired dragonian girl was eyeing the jewelry from a street vendor with great interest.

“It’s Karan,” Bond said.

“Yeah.”

The vendor was selling accessories such as glass-bead necklaces and other items with stones that couldn't quite be polished into gems. It was a trendy stall that made up for its cheaper goods with the designer's sense of style. The glass-bead necklaces had an exotic flair that Nick thought would look great on Karan.

Anyone trying to sell jewelry on this street was suspicious, though. The products they sold almost always turned out too good to be true.

“Hmm? Are you not going to talk to her, Nick?”

“...Wait a moment.”

The street vendor began speaking to Karan. It appeared that Karan was looking at the products as she listened, then asking the man about the price of one of the goods, and she decided to buy it. The street vendor was giving her a long-winded explanation of the pendant she chose and wrapping it when she tightly grabbed his arm.

“Ow?!”

“You just switched it, didn't you?”

“N-no, I didn't!”

“Should I call someone over?”

“Urgh...”

The street vendor gave in and produced a pendant from his pocket. From a distance, it looked identical to the one Karan had chosen, but Nick was sure it wasn't the same. He had switched out the one Karan wanted to buy with a defective item, but she caught him in the act. It was a common scam.

“I-I'm sorry! I'll never do it again, so please let me go!”

Unfortunately for him, the merchant's pleading had the opposite effect he intended, and he was arrested by some Sun Knights who happened to be passing by on patrol. They led him away, not even listening to the vendor's argument. He must have been a repeat offender; he would never have been taken away without questioning otherwise.

“Hey, Karan,” Nick said after approaching her.

“Oh, hey, Nick,” Karan responded.

“Looked like you had some trouble there.”

“Uh, yeah,” she said evasively. After a short silence, she glared at Nick suspiciously. “...You were watching, weren't you?”

“Yep.”

“Meanie.”

“Guilty.” Nick kept his face composed and avoided her angry eyes. “You looked like you were handling it just fine.”

“I was, but...”

“Come on, let's go. Tiana and Zem are waiting for us.”

“Okay.”

Nick resumed walking with Karan and Bond following behind him. The crowd thinned as they walked, and by the time they reached the Fishermen Adventurers Guild, there were no longer any merchants in sight. It was illegal to set up a stall in front of a public building.

“Hey, Nick,” Karan called out, stopping him before he went inside.

“What’s up?” Nick responded.

“What would you have done if I didn’t handle it fine?”

“I’m not a nice person, so I probably would’ve made fun of you for getting tricked.”

“So you would tell me I was tricked?”

“Huh? Yeah, I would,” Nick answered without hesitation.

“...You’re awful.”

“Yep.”

“You’re a liar, too.” But Karan didn’t appear to be criticizing him. “I can’t believe anything you say. You really suck at acting like you don’t care,” she said.

Nick averted his eyes. He probably would have helped if she needed it. He would have told her what the merchant did, too, and how to avoid it in the future. But as he watched her get through the situation on her own, he felt strangely moved. She was learning how to take care of herself one step at a time. She even read his thoughts and told him that he “sucks” at keeping them hidden. That was really embarrassing.

“Whatever. They’re waiting for us, so let’s go inside!” he said, hiding his embarrassment.

“Okay,” Karan responded. She chuckled to herself and followed behind Nick with Bond. Nick couldn’t see how her tail was wagging back and forth happily. “By the way, what are you carrying?”

Nick was carrying around a ton of bags. He looked like the servant of a noble lady on a shopping spree.

“Oh, these are... You’ll see once we’re all together.”

The three of them entered the Fishermen Adventurers Guild. They pushed their way through the crowd of adventurers, merrily discussing their get-rich-quick schemes and bragging about their own adventures, and searched for their remaining two party members. This guild was the gathering ground for intermediate adventurers, and it was always packed on weekdays. There was no guarantee they had found a table.

“Nick! Karan! Over here!”

That worry turned out to be unfounded. Nick turned toward the voice and saw a beautiful blond girl and a tall priestly man, both eating barley porridge that didn’t look particularly good.

“Hmm? This is a little early for lunch, you two,” Nick said.

“This is our breakfast and lunch. I got carried away at the hostess club last night and drank way too much alcohol,” Zem responded sheepishly.

“It’s not my fault! I totally should’ve won that race! There’s no way anyone could’ve predicted it would dissolve into an all-out dragon brawl! The bookmakers should’ve given us our money back!” Tiana ranted.

“Cool. I’m not surprised by any of this.” Nick sighed and took a seat. Bond and Karan sat to either side of him.

“Oh, come on, you’re one to talk. Don’t even act like you didn’t splurge yesterday, too. What’s with all those bags?” Tiana accused.

“This is all for work.”

“So are you saying you didn’t spend any money on your favorite idol?”

“Urgh...”

Nick didn’t think he spent as much as Zem and Tiana, but his pockets were considerably lighter. Not all of his spending was on the concert and merchandise, though. He repaired his dagger and armor, moved into a better inn, searched high and low for suitable clothes to wear for the concert, and treated himself to a nice meal after being tempted by all the delicious food Karan was eating. He spent money like a much richer man.

Nick looked at Karan, and she turned away guiltily. “...Let’s not talk about that! I’ve got some work stuff to discuss,” he said.

“Well, well. Sounds like someone had some fun yesterday,” Zem said teasingly.

“That sounds really indecent coming from you, Zem. Never say that again.”

“Is that real disgust on your face? I’m hurt.”

Zem cackled, and Tiana smirked.

“You all have quite a lot of bad habits,” Bond said, shrugging exaggeratedly.

“Didn’t you spend all the allowance I gave you in just one day?” Nick fired back.

“Hmm-hmm, I spent it all on books. I am investing in myself.”

“Yeah, right. Not one of those was educational.”

When Nick left for the idol concert, he gave Bond an allowance to spend however he wished. He returned to the inn to find romance and adventure novels stacked on his desk. No one could have bought them but Bond.

“It is important to keep up to date with popular culture,” Bond responded defensively.

“There’s nothing wrong with having a hobby. Anyway, do you

guys have some time to talk?" Nick asked.

"What is it? Oh yeah, you said you have work stuff to discuss. Does it have something to do with those bags?" Tiana asked in return.

"Yeah, it does... I have good news and bad news," Nick began ominously.

"Don't talk like you're some shady salesman. Just give it to us straight," Tiana interjected.

"Geez, is that any way to talk to someone who brought presents for you all?"

"Presents?"

Nick ignored her. "You're first, Bond."

"Okay," Bond answered, looking fidgety. His eyes were focused on Nick's bags.

"Your armor is ready. Here it is."

Nick took out the contents of a large shopping bag and put them on the table. It was a silver-colored breastplate and a plain broadsword sheathed in a scabbard, along with a belt and metal fittings to equip them. Bond picked them up one by one and looked at them happily.

"I want to put them on! Assist me!"

"Relax, I will."

Nick moved behind Bond, helped him get the items on, and tightened his belt.

"They feel better than when I tried them on the first time," Bond said.

"That's 'cause they were tailored for your height," Nick explained.

Nick took Bond to an armorer's shop on Hammer Alley a few days ago. His true form may have been a literal sword, but he didn't have a weapon when in human form. He didn't have armor, either. Nick used the party budget to buy him a weapon-and-armor set, and they were now ready for him to wear.

"So? How do I look?" Bond asked happily, spinning around once.

"You look sharp. Guess clothes really do make the man," Nick responded.

Bond danced nimbly with his armor and sword equipped without stumbling or bumping into anyone, despite how crowded the guild was. It was cute and impressive.

"Yeah, you look good," Karan said.

"It suits you," Zem complimented.

"It looks surprisingly natural," Tiana agreed.

Encouraged by their words of praise, Bond spun in place. He continued until Nick snapped and told him to sit down before he started annoying people.

"All right, you're next, Karan," Nick said.

“Huh? Me?” she responded.

“It’s not a present, exactly...but it is important. Here you go.”

Nick brought out a brand-new metal box. It had a handle on the top and a very sturdy-looking lock, and there wasn’t a scratch on it. It was the very picture of security. The only unusual thing about its appearance was a stone embedded next to the keyhole in the lock.

“This isn’t just any safe—it’s a magic one. It repels lock-opening and probing spells as a countermeasure against thieves. The safe itself is really sturdy, too. It can apparently survive being stepped on by a dragon,” Nick explained.

Karan looked at the safe so closely it was like she was trying to burn a hole through it. This was the first promise Nick had made when they formed the party. He would entrust the safe to Karan, give the key to Zem, and manage the ledger himself, while Tiana would monitor the ledger and the money. This safe was proof that he was going to keep his promise that they would all play a part and keep each other in check.

“I had been holding on to the money temporarily, but we’ll put it in this safe from now on. Take good care of it,” Nick said.

“O-okay,” Karan responded, taking the safe reverently. She held it as gently as if it were a baby bird that fell out of a tree.

“You don’t have to hold it like that, Karan. It’s not gonna break.”

“Sh-shut up.” Embarrassed, Karan set the safe in front of her on the table.

Nick fought to hold back a smile, then produced two keys. “The keys are for Zem,” he announced.

“I see...,” Zem replied. He took the keys just as carefully and looked at them with great interest. They looked perfectly normal except for a stone embedded in the bow that resembled the one on the safe’s lock.

“This key also has a special security feature. The safe can’t be unlocked or locked unless the stones on the lock and key react to each other. This prevents someone from opening the safe with a forgery. I’m giving you a spare, too, so don’t lose it.”

“I will guard them carefully.”

“Next, I’m gonna manage the ledger. I’ve already been doing that, so I just bought a new pen.”

Nick took a pen from his chest pocket and showed it off to the others. It was a fountain pen with a simple design. It wasn’t magical like the safe and the keys, but it was light and comfortable to hold. He was rather proud of the results of his shopping spree.

One person in particular looked at him with boredom.

“Hey, do I get nothing?” Tiana asked.

“I didn’t think you really needed anything, but...” Nick pulled out

a long wooden case and gave it to her.

“Huh... Can I open it?”

“Go ahead.”

Tiana opened the case to reveal a rectangular wooden frame containing columns of five balls each. The balls were polished stones, and they glowed dimly when Tiana touched them.

“Is this...a magic abacus?” she asked.

“Good, you know what it is. That means I don’t have to explain it.”

A magic abacus was an abacus that automatically performed any calculation the user wished it to. It had a hard time with complex equations, but it could handle basic arithmetical operations and perform other everyday calculations such as determining averages, area, and volume.

“There were a lot of different types, and I wasn’t sure which to get, so I just got the most popular one. If you want a different kind, we can still return it...”

“Don’t worry; this one will do.” Despite her haughty tone, she immediately began testing the magic abacus while smiling. The others watched with interest as the shiny balls moved on their own.

“Cool. Make good use of it,” Nick responded.

Nick got a fuzzy feeling in his heart as he watched his party members study their presents happily. The party setup he initially proposed had finally been realized. They weren’t just going to scrape by; they were going to strive to improve as adventurers.

Nick held back tears and braced himself. He was feeling brave enough to bring up the next topic.

“All right, that’s it for the good news. Let’s move on to the bad.”

“Oh yeah, you said that at the beginning. Did something happen?” Tiana asked.

“No, it’s nothing serious. But...” Nick trailed off, unable to get himself to say it. That gave the others a bad feeling. “...It’ll be faster to just show you.” He produced a small cloth bag from his pocket. “Open the safe, Karan. It’s not locked yet.”

“O-okay.”

Karan opened the safe. There were a number of partitions inside. It had a pocket to put coins in and multiple spaces to store folded-up contracts and other things. Nick counted the coins in his bag and put them in the safe’s pocket.

“We have two copper coins...and three small copper coins,” Zem said, counting.

“I thought if we’re getting a safe and an abacus, I might as well go for quality, so I ended up spending more than I intended... This is the entirety of the Survivors’ funds,” Nick said.

“Um, so...” Tiana broke off, looking like she had a headache. Nick spoke the cruel truth that they had all reasoned out.

“We’ve used nearly the entire party’s budget. All we have left is two hundred and thirty dina.”

They all stared at the inside of the safe in dumbfounded silence.

“...Pfft.”

“Th-this is...certainly not ideal...”

“We’re hopeless... Ha-ha...”

“Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha! How do we do this every time? M-my stomach...!”

Tiana, Zem, and Karan all burst out laughing. The adventurers at the nearby tables looked over to see what was going on and began to laugh as well when they heard how little money they had left. A few people began to heckle them.

“Shut up! Who said that?!” Nick yelled back.

“Make sure to save, or you’ll end up on the streets!”

“That’s right! That’s not an allowance!”

“Excuse me?!” Nick yelled again, but Bond shrugged.

“You have no comeback, Nick. Your only choice is to continue adventuring,” he said.

“Good lord... Enough laughing! We need to get to work!” Nick shouted. He clapped his hands, but they were lost in their own little world, unable to be brought out of their laughing fit.

Now that he thought about it, 230 dina was nothing to sneeze at. After all, two hundred dina was enough to buy barley porridge and ale at the Newbies Adventurers Guild. He might even be able to enjoy that flavorless porridge now, if he ate it with these companions.

“Meeting’s over! We’re leaving for a labyrinth! Now!”

““““Okay!””””



A smile slowly spread across Bond's face as he watched Nick and his party members make a scene. They were too distracted to pay attention to him.

The important thing is I got out of the labyrinth.

Bond didn't tell any lies when he met them in the labyrinth. It was true that he was deceived and locked away by the Adventurers Guild—and that he had suffered for years without a swordsman to wield him. He had even felt a faint longing to work with an adventurer's party like he was now. He was having a lot of fun. But there was one important thing he had yet to mention.

The evil presence has grown... The seal on the demons may be coming undone. Father would have been angry with me if I contented myself to toil in the labyrinth.

The grand demons appeared in the world of man once a millennium—or once every few centuries at the cycle's shortest. The long period of time between appearances meant that even if word of the demons was passed down in legend, people always forgot or made light of the danger and started fights among themselves. The last war was so extreme that civilization almost came to an end.

The mission Bond was given when he survived the war was to maintain as free a position as possible and watch over the world of man. That mission was the reason he hacked into the labyrinth's security, led the adventurers his way, and insisted they take him with them.

I hope my fear is groundless... But I may need them to become heroes, Bond thought as he watched the party squabble.

"We should pick a labyrinth where we can make more money! Like a place where I can wipe out hordes of monsters at once with my magic, or where we can pick a bunch of valuable herbs! Do you know any like that?!" Tiana asked.

"Do you really think any labyrinth could be that convenient? Let's just go!" Nick snapped.

"Oh, come on, you must know some! I want to get rich!"

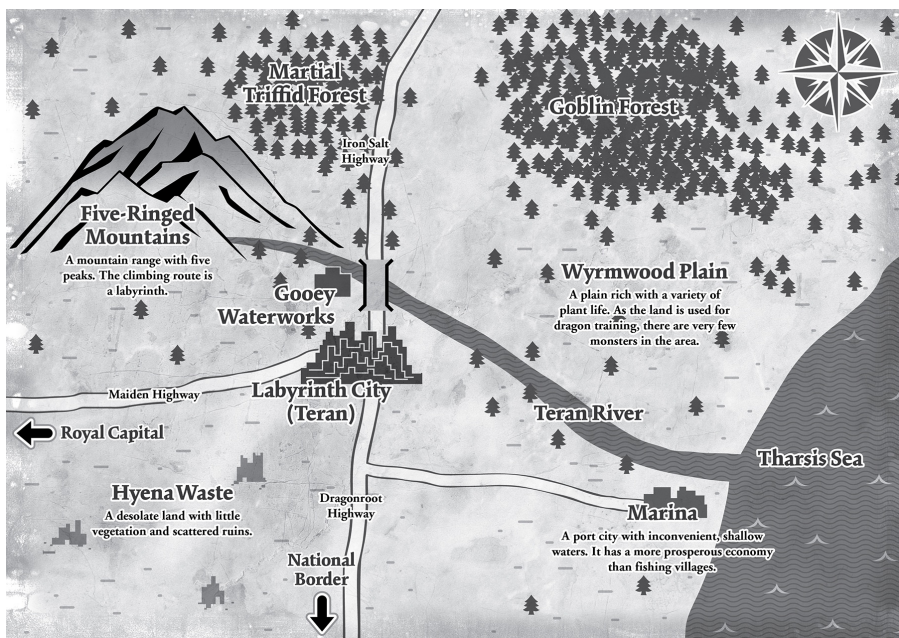
"You think I don't?!"

Will these four really do? Bond thought as he watched them yell at each other over money. Whatever his doubts, however, they were not unpleasant people. They desired money, but they did not lust after power. They felt sympathy for Bond and agreed to not hand him to the Adventurers Guild. Their kindness filled him with a desire to watch over and protect them.

Though in reality, they were currently looking after him. *Well, at least I'm having fun.* He had lived a long life...if a sword could be said to be living. Being picked up by this adventurer's party might not have been such a bad thing.

APPARENTLY,
DISILLUSIONED
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◆ The Ultimate Party Is Born ◆



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Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by Susumu Kurai

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off against his
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